THE ® **saint** MYSTERY MAGAZINE

AUG.
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Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

Blind Man's Hood
by Carter Dickson

House of Golden Death
by Sax Rohmer

Nobody Deserved Justice
by Rex Stout

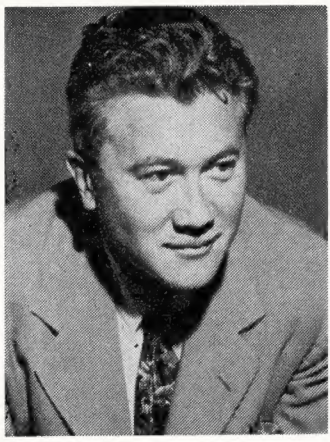
The Marriner Murder
by Q. Patrick

The Golden Journey
by Leslie Charteris

ADVENTURE OF THE MOSAIC CYLINDERS
A NEW SOLAR PONS NOVELET by AUGUST DERLETH

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION

A KING-SIZE PUBLICATION



TO OUR ROSTER of pen pals we have recently added Ethel G. Roberts of Orford, N. H., who wrote us the other day in part as follows:

> ... Stopping off in Princeton, N. J. on my way, I went into THE Book Shop and asked for "The Saint." Answer: "We do *not* carry any religious books."

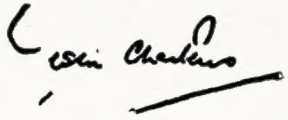
Reading this, I was reminded of another letter I received once, from Sister Something-or-other of a certain Convent, asking if I would be generous enough to donate one of my Saint books to their library. I was glad to send her a sample; but she never acknowledged it, and I sometimes have grave doubts whether it was the type of literature she was expecting.

This kind of experience might be disheartening to anyone who has devoted as many years as I have to trying to make a character into a household word, if it were not that I had previously discovered that a quite incredible percentage of modern booksellers, or at least their store employees, are as ignorant of what they are handling as any seller of lucky-dip chances at a church bazaar. I myself, only a few months ago, trying to buy the then Number One Best Seller, *Lolita*, had the joy of meeting a saleswoman who gave me a blank stare and asked if it was a children's book.

Thus it would not surprise me at all to learn that seekers for one of August Derleth's stories of Solar Pons, such as this month's feature ADVENTURE OF THE MOSAIC CYLINDERS, are often referred to the physics or space travel department.

Of course, it may also be dangerous to make too obvious assumptions. A Carter Dickson tale of the Department of Queer Complaints would suggest to any aficionado the participation of Colonel March, but BLIND MAN'S HOOD is solved without him. Sax Rohmer's HOUSE OF GOLDEN DEATH is not menaced by Dr. Fu Manchu or cleaned up by Nayland Smith. And Rex Stout's NOBODY DESERVED JUSTICE doesn't even mention Nero Wolf.

THE GOLDEN JOURNEY actually does star the only Saint who is completely ignored by all serious hagiographers, but there isn't a crook or even a really wicked person in it. We must have been feeling pretty sneaky this month.



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SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.

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the golden journey

by . . . Leslie Charteris

The troubles of young love had always seemed much more worth while to the Saint than most other things . . .

PROBABLY if Belinda Deane hadn't been born with such liquid brown eyes, such a small straight nose, such a delicious mouth, and such a delightful chin, she would never have been spoiled. And if she hadn't been spoiled, Simon Templar would never have felt called upon to interfere. And if he hadn't interfered . . . But the course of far more important histories has been changed by the curve of an eyebrow before now.

Belinda Deane knocked on the door of his hotel bedroom in Munich at half-past twelve, which was less than an hour after his breakfast; and he put down his razor and went cheerfully to let her in.

"I—I'm sorry," she said, when she saw him.

"Why?" Simon asked. "Don't you approve of this dressing gown?"

He returned to the mirror and calmly resumed the scraping of his face. The girl stood with her back to the door, twisting a scrap of handkerchief in her fingers.

"Mr. Templar," she said, "my bag's been stolen."

"How did it happen?"

"It was in my room. I—I left

Simon Templar had seldom had such a charming — and irritating — involuntary student as he had now, on the road to Innsbruck. . . .

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it for a few minutes, and when I came back it was gone!"

"Too bad," murmured the Saint gravely.

He turned the angle of his jawbone with care, stretching his head sideways. His unruffled accents held a sublime and seraphic Saintliness of innocence which in itself was a volume of explanation for his nickname. It took the girl's breath away for a moment; and then she froze over.

"Too bad," she said coldly, "is putting it mildly. It had all my money in it, and my letter of credit, and my passport—everything. I've never been in such a mess in my life. What am I going to do?"

"Have you told the hotel about it?"

"Of course. I've had managers and clerks and detectives prowling about my room for the last half-hour."

Simon shrugged.

"It seems a pity you didn't go on to Garmisch yesterday with Jack."

She gazed at him glacially; but his back was turned to her and he was imperturbably intent on his shave. A glacial gaze inevitably loses much of its effect when it has to be reflected by a mirror and the recipient is merely paying the polite minimum of attention anyhow. The disadvantage made her furious, and she controlled herself with an effort. Simon's amused blue eyes decided that Jack Easton had certainly picked a Tartar; but he admitted that wrath and hauteur sat very well on her small imperious face.

"If you remember," she said with unnatural restraint, "I told my fiance that tramping about with him over a lot of dreary roads and sleeping in filthy village inns without any sanitation was not included in the terms of our engagement, and just wasn't my idea of a good time. Also that happens to be my own business. Why don't you try to suggest something helpful?"

"You haven't any friends here?"

"None at all."

The Saint raised one eyebrow.

"In that case, you're only left with your bank's correspondents here, or the American consulate. Failing those two," he added flippantly, "you could lie down on the tramlines outside and wait with resignation for the next tram—"

The door banged violently behind her; and Simon glanced at it and chuckled.

He ran cold water into the basin, submerged his head to remove the last traces of lather, and dried it off with a rough towel. Then he brushed his hair and sat down at the small desk where the telephone stood. He fished the directory out of a drawer, and with it the girl's expensive bag. From it he took her letter of credit, discovered the Munich

correspondents named there, and called the number.

"This is the American consulate," he said, when he was connected with the necessary Personage. "We have information of a trick that's being played on the banks around here by an American girl. She comes in with the story that her letter of credit has been stolen, and tries to get an advance without it. There is no accurate description of her at the moment, except that she is dark and about one meter sixty centimeters tall. Anything else we learn will be communicated to the police; but in the meanwhile we're taking the responsibility of warning the principal banks. Your safest course will be to make no advance in those circumstances. Tell the girl you will have to get in touch with New York or wherever it is, and ask her to call back in three or four days. By that time you'll have a full description from the police."

A couple of minutes later he was speaking to the American consul.

"I say!" he bleated, in the plaintive tones of Oxford. "D'you happen to know a young thing by the name of Deane—Miss Deane?"

"No," said the consul blankly. "What about her?"

"Well, I met her in a beer garden last night. She's an American girl—at least, she said she was. Dashed pretty, too. She told me her bag and things had been stolen, and I lent her five pounds to wire home for money. Well, I've just been sniffing a cocktail with another johnny and we were comparing notes, and it turns out he met the same girl in another beer garden last Tuesday and lent her ten dollars on the same story. So we toddled round to the hotel she said she was staying at to make inquiries, and they hadn't heard of her at all. So we decided she must be a crook, and we thought we'd better tell you to warn your other citizens about her, old boy!"

"I'm very much obliged. Can you tell me what she looks like?"

"Like a wicked man's dream, old fruit! About five foot three, with the most luscious brown eyes . . ."

His last call was to the hotel manager. Simon Templar spoke German, as he spoke other languages, like a native; and he put on his stiffest and most official staccato for the occasion.

"This is the Central Police Office. We have information received that a new swindle is by an American girl worked. She tells you that her money from her room in your hotel stolen is. Then will she a few days more to stay attempt, or money to borrow . . . So! That has already yourself befallen . . . No, unfortunately is there nothing to do. It is impossible the untruthfulness of her story to prove. You must

however no compensation pay; and if you her room engaged announce, will you surely less money lose."

Simon finished his dressing in an aura of silent laughter, and went out to lunch.

He was scanning a magazine in his room about four o'clock when another knock came on his door and the girl walked in. She looked pale and tired; but the Saint hardened his heart. Even the spectacle of his attire could only rouse her to a faint spark of sarcasm.

"Have you joined the boy scouts or something?" she asked. Simon turned his eyes down to his brown knees unabashed.

"I'm going down to Innsbruck and up over the Brenner Pass into Italy. Tramping about over a lot of dreary roads and sleeping in ditches—all that sort of thing. It's one of the most beautiful trips in the whole world, and the only way you can get the best out of it is on foot. I'm catching a train to Lenggries at five, and starting from there early tomorrow morning—that cuts out the only dull part. What luck have you had?"

"None at all." The girl flung herself into a chair. "I'd never have believed anything could have been so hopeless. My God, the way I've been looked at today, you might think I was some kind of crook! I went to the bank. Yes, they'd be delighted to get in touch with my bank in Boston, but they couldn't do anything till they had a reply. How long would it take? Four days at least. And what was I going to do till then? The manager didn't know, but he shrugged his shoulders as if he thought I'd be lucky to stay out of jail that long. Then I went to the consulate. The consul's eyes were popping out of his head almost as soon as I'd begun to tell him the trouble. If the bank was willing to cable Boston for me, what was the trouble? I told him I couldn't go without eating for four days. He said he was only authorized to allow me fifty cents a day and send me home. I asked him what he thought I could eat for fifty cents, and he bawled me out! He said I was a disgrace to the country, and an American citizen had no business to be abroad without any means of support, and if he shipped me home I'd go straight to jail when I landed. And then he showed me the door. I've never been so humiliated in my life! If I don't get that consul fired out of the service—"

"But surely you can stay on here till some money arrives?" suggested the Saint ingenuously.

"Not a chance. I've just seen the manager. He said as much as he could without insulting me openly—told me he would require my room by seven o'clock if I couldn't pay him up to date by that time."

"Distinctly awkward," remarked Simon judicially.

The girl bit her lip.

"I—I've got to do something," she stammered. "I don't know how to say it—I hate asking you, after all this—but I've got to have something to see me through till the bank gets a reply from Boston, and they can't do that till after the week-end. Or when Jack gets to Innsbruck about Tuesday—I can send a wire to him there. I—I know I'm practically a stranger, but if you could lend me just enough—"

"My dear," said the Saint blandly, "I should be delighted. But I haven't got it to lend."

Her eyes opened wide.

"You haven't got it?"

He spread out a brown hand.

"Take a look. My luggage went off in advance this afternoon. All I'm going to need—toothbrush and towel and blankets—is in my rucksack. My bill here is paid, and I've got about forty marks in my belt—enough to buy food and beer. I can't get any more till I get to Bolzano. I couldn't even send you on to Innsbruck—the third-class fare for one is about fifteen marks, and the remaining twenty-five wouldn't feed me."

She stared at him aghast. Her pretty mouth quivered. There was a moistness very close to the tears of sheer hysterical fright in her eyes.

"But what on earth am I going to do?" she wailed.

Simon lighted a cigarette, and allowed his gaze to return to her face.

"You'll just have to walk to Innsbruck with me," he said.

SIMON TEMPLAR had been cordially disliked by many different people in his time, but rarely with such a whole-hearted simplicity as that which Belinda Deane lavished on him the next morning. On the other hand, unpopularity had never lowered his spirits: he strode along carolling to the skies, and meditating on the infinite variety of the accidents of travel.

He had met Belinda Deane and Jack Easton on the train from Stuttgart a week before. There had been some complication about their tickets, and their knowledge of German was infinitesimal. The Saint, to whom human companionship was the breath of life, and who would seize any excuse to beguile a journey by making the acquaintance of his fellow-travellers, had stepped in as an interpreter. Thereafter they had gone around Munich together, until Easton had separated to join an old friend — "a great-open-space fiend," he described him—on a short walking trip from Garmisch to Innsbruck by way of Oberammergau. This decision had been the subject of a distressing scene at which Simon had been coerced into the position of umpire.

It was not by any means the first he had witnessed. One glance had been sufficient to tell him that Belinda had been blessed with a face and figure that would make even hard-boiled waiters scramble for the privilege of serving her; but one hour in her company had been enough to show him that they must have been doing it ever since she left her cradle, with the inevitable results. Everything that New England and Paris had to give had been endowed upon her—background, breed, education, poise. She could have been taken for the flower of American sophistication at its most perfect. Intelligence, knowledge, charm—she had them all. She knew exactly the right thing to say and do in any circumstances; entirely because she had been trained to circumstances where the same things were always being said and done. Jack Easton, a youngster of less ancient lineage, confessed that there were times when she scared him.

"Sometimes she ought to be spanked," he said once, when he and Simon were alone together after that last scene.

He was annoyed, because the quarrel had consisted of a healthily stubborn bluntness piling up in competition with an increasingly chilly self-possession; and there was something about the Saint which always drew out confidences.

"What she really needs," said Easton, "is for somebody to club her and drag her off to a desert island and make her wash dishes and dig up her own potatoes."

"Why don't you do it?" murmured the Saint.

"Because I know she'd never forgive me as long as she lived. Besides," said Easton, morosely practical, "I don't know any desert islands."

Simon smoked for a time before he replied. The idea had come to him on the spur of the moment, and the more he thought of it the more it made him smile. The troubles of young love had always seemed more worth while to him than most things.

"It wouldn't matter so much if she never forgave me," he had said. "And it could be done without desert islands."

Belinda trotted beside him and hated him. The leisurely swing of his long legs was measured to a pace that made her work to keep up with him. His pack rode like a feather on his broad shoulders, and the possibility of fatigue didn't seem to enter his head. She glanced sidelong at his strong brown profile, down over his check cotton shirt with rolled-up sleeves, his broad leather belt, leather shorts, and bare legs; and hated him still more for the ease of his untrammeled masculinity. She had been moved to sarcasm at the expense of his costume in

the hotel; but now she tried not to admit that the curious glances of the few people they passed were centered on her. Her light tweed skirt came from Paris, her green suede golfing jacket was the latest thing from Fifth Avenue: from the rudimentary crown of her jaunty little hat to the welts of her green and white buckskin shoes she was as smart and pretty as a picture, and she knew it. It was unjust that that smartness should give her no advantage.

The Saint sang.

"Give me the life I love,
Let the lave go by me—"

Belinda gritted her small white teeth. She had never done much walking, and after the first few miles she was feeling tired. The fact that the man at her side should have been able to allot the major ration of his breath to singing was like a deliberate affront. She began to wonder for the first time why she should ever have considered his fantastic proposition; but it had seemed like the only practical solution. Even now, she could think of nothing else that she could have done. And from the moment when she had wearily accepted, he had taken charge—registered her luggage to Innsbruck, paid the carriage fees, rushed her to the station, almost abducted her while her mind was still numbed by the shock of inconceivable circumstances . . . The morning grew hotter, and she struggled out of her jacket.

"Could you find room for this somewhere?" she asked, like a queen conferring a favor.

The Saint cocked a clear blue eye at her.

"Lady," he said, "this pack weighs twenty-five pounds. Are you sure you can't manage twelve ounces?"

She walked on speechlessly.

The scenery meant nothing to her. Roads were merely the links in an endless trail, which ended tantalizingly at every bend and the crest of every rise, only to lead on again immediately. When he called the first halt, at the end of nearly four hours' marching, she fell on the dusty grass by the roadside and wondered if she would ever be able to get up again.

"My stockings have got holes in them," she said.

He nodded.

"There's nothing like plenty of ventilation to keep your feet in condition."

She tore her stockings off without a word and threw them away; but her hands trembled. Simon, unmoved, opened his pack and produced food — coarse black bread and butter, cheese, and liver sausage.

"How about some lunch?"

She looked at the bread down her nose.

"What's that stuff?"

"The most wholesome bread in the world. All the vitamins, minerals, and roughage that any dietitian could desire. Preserves the teeth and massages the intestines."

"I don't care for it, thank you." As a matter of fact, she was at the stage where her stomach felt too tired for food. "All I want is a drink."

"We'll stop at the next village and get some beer."

"I don't drink beer."

The Saint ploughed appreciatively on into his massive hunk of bread.

"The water should be all right in that stream over there," he said, indicating it with a movement of his hand.

"Are you suggesting," she inquired icily, "that I should go down on all fours and lap it up like a cow?"

Simon chewed.

"Like a gazelle," he said, "would be more poetic."

She closed her eyes and lay there motionlessly; and if he sensed the simmering of the volcano he gave no sign of it. He ate his fill and smoked a cigarette; then he walked over to the stream, drank frugally, and bathed his face. When he came back she was sitting up. He strapped his pack and hoisted it deftly.

"Ready?"

Somehow she picked herself up. Her muscles had stiffened during the rest, and it was agony to squeeze her feet back into her shoes, which were cut for appearance rather than comfort. Only a strained and crackling obstinacy drew the effort out of her: the mockery of his cool blue gaze told her only too frankly that he was waiting for her to break down, and she wondered how long she would be able to cheat him of that satisfaction.

He drove her on relentlessly. Hills rose and fell away. Scattered cottages, tilled fields, pastures, woods, blurred by in a crawling panorama. They marched through a deep forest of mighty trees where woodcutters were working, along a road lined with stacks of brown logs. The sweet-smelling air held the music of whining saws and the clunk and ring of axes; but it meant nothing to her but an interval of blessed relief from the heat of the sun. Even then, the shadowy vastness of it was a little terrifying. She had never been so close to the rich mightiness of the earth: to her, "country" had only been something rather cute and amusing, a drawing-room picture brought into three dimensions, to be visited as a stunt in the company of sleek automobiles whose purring mechanism drowned the silences with their reassurance of civilized man's conquest of nature. Without that comfort she was like a child left in the dark. On the rare occasions when a car passed them she watched it yearningly, and

then licked the dust from her lips and felt lonelier when it had gone. Once a cart kept them company for a quarter of an hour, while Simon and the driver exchanged shouted witticisms.

Presently their path led beside a small river, with a tall ledge of rock rising on their left. The going was worse there, strewn with loose stones which seemed to slip backwards with her as fast as she went forward. The crunch of them under her plodding footsteps resolved itself into a maddening rhythm of hate. *"Beast—bully — swine — beast — bully —swine!"* they drummed out, bruising her feet at every step. Then she slipped on one. There was a tearing sound, and she stopped and leaned against the rocky wall.

"My heel's come off."

"What's holding your toes on?" asked the Saint interestedly.

Suddenly all her pent-up bitterness boiled over, so that for a moment she forgot her weariness. Her eyes blazed, and his tanned features swam in her vision. Before she knew what she was doing she had smacked his face.

When her sight cleared again he had not moved.

"Belinda," he said quietly, "there's another lesson you obviously haven't learned. When a girl strikes a man she's trading on a false idea of chivalry. If you do that again I shall put you across my knee."

"You wouldn't dare!" she panted; but for the first time in her life she was afraid.

He made no attempt to argue with her. Lowering his pack, he opened it and took out a pair of plain leather sandals.

"I thought something like that would happen. These are your size, and you'll find them much more comfortable."

He waited while she took off her shoes and threw them into the river, where they floated forlornly like derelict emblems of respectability. Looking down at her feet, she felt the incongruity of her attire and jerked off the jaunty little hat. Shortly afterwards she lost patience with carrying it and let it fall by the wayside—another relic of herself to be marked up in the score of hatred which was etched on her soul in burning acid.

Evening found their path widening out into a bowl of open land, flat and stony, where the river diverged into a network of rambling channels winding and intersecting across an area of hard barren ground broken by a few stunted trees and clumps of parched grass. Simon pointed to a house that was visible on a slight rise in the midst of it.

"That's an inn," he said, "and there will be beer."

She saw it as a prospect of rest, a thousand leagues distant. She was so tired that each individual step called for a separate

effort, and she had to keep her eyes fixed on the objective to force herself to complete the distance. The guest-room inside was unlighted and gloomy; she expected it was filthy as well, but she was past caring. She sank on to a wooden bench, put her elbows on the stained bare table, and buried her face in her hands.

By that time there was a gnawing void of hunger below her ribs; and when the serving-girl came she ordered chocolate. Simon called for beer, with an extra tankard for the gamekeeper who sat puffing his pipe in the far corner.

The gamekeeper was a big slow-spoken man with a lined weatherbeaten face like a walnut. He wore the costume of the country—small green felt hat with a brush at the back, leather shorts hung on embroidered leather suspenders, striped woolen gaiters which left his ankles bare. Simon steered him on to the subject of camping. The gamekeeper said it was forbidden in the woods on the east, through which a footpath would take them across the frontier into Austria. It was a great pity, said the gamekeeper, because he knew what would have been an ideal spot only a few hundred meters away; and he winked prodigiously, and roared with laughter. Simon bought him another tankard of beer, and they brought the serving-girl into the conversation. The low-ceilinged room rang with the ebb and flow of their carefree voices.

Belinda drank her hot syrupy chocolate, and thought: "He's vulgar, he's common, he only wants to humiliate me. How could he have anything to talk about with people like that? He can come in here and flirt with a little servant girl like a tough in a saloon. That man must despise him. It's horrible! Oh, my God, why didn't I know what he was like before?" She couldn't understand a word, and nobody paid any attention to her. She had never been ignored before. "They're all cheap, all of them," she thought. "They don't talk to me because they know I belong to a different class." She raised her chin and tried to express this superiority in her attitude; but it was cold comfort. When Simon returned to her it was almost relief.

"I'd like to have something to eat and go straight to bed," she said.

The Saint raised his eyebrows.

"You can have some food as soon as we're settled in; but we aren't settling in here."

"I tell you I can't walk another yard," she said haggardly. "Can't you see I'm half dead?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to walk another three hundred yards or so."

"What's wrong with this place?"

He gestured with his tankard.

"We're sleeping in the woods."

She stared at him incredulously.

"I don't understand you."

"In the woods," explained the Saint. *"Im wald. Dans le bois. Unter den Linden."*

"You must be crazy."

"Not at all. The partridges do it, and suffer no grievous harm. I've done it often enough myself, and very rarely died of it. You don't seem to understand the situation. Ambling along as we are, it'll take us about a week to get to Innsbruck. At the moment, we are the proud possessors of some thirty-five marks. You pay four marks for a bed in a Gasthaus; and we've still got to eat."

She realized that the man in the corner was watching her curiously. It came to her that at all costs her dignity must leave that room untouched. The inexorable mathematics of Simon's argument scarcely made any impression on her; she was in the grip of circumstances that were crushing her till she could have screamed, but she could not make a scene and bring herself down to the level she had just despised.

She stood up and went out without speaking, Simon following her. It had grown darker; and the twitter and chirp and rustle of night creatures was all around them as they entered the wood. Simon took the lead, humming. The spot the gamekeeper had described was near a tributary of the river they had recently quitted, a grassy hollow away from the footpath and a few feet above the stream. Simon's expert eyes appraised it and found no fault. He lowered his pack to the ground and began to unfasten it.

"Will you get some water while I make the fire?" he said.

He put the billycan down beside her and went off to gather dry logs. In a very short time he had kindled a cheerful blaze; and she huddled gratefully up to it, for it had turned colder after the sun went down. Simon took bread, eggs, and butter from his rucksack, and picked up the billy. It was empty.

"I asked you to get some water," he said.

She raised her sullen eyes to him over the fire.

"I'm not a servant," she said.

"Neither am I," said the Saint quietly. "You'll do your share or go hungry—whichever you prefer."

The girl struggled to her feet.

"Oh, I could kill you!" she cried passionately, and went groping down to the stream.

BELINDA fell asleep at first out of pure exhaustion; but it was still dark when she woke up again. The fire had died down to a cone of red embers, and there was a chill in the air that made her shiver. She pulled the spare width of her groundsheet over

her, as Simon had shown her how to do if it began to rain; but it was too thin to give any warmth. Even a summer night turns cool out of doors towards two and three o'clock: unsuspected little breezes stir the air and strike through the thickest blankets. The body's warmth, unguarded by the moderating vigilance of walls and ceilings, drifts away like smoke in the limitless vastness of space.

The grass, which had looked so flat and felt so soft, developed innumerable bumps and hardnesses which bruised her bones. A tenuous dampness rose from it; and when she moved her head on the unsympathetic pillow of her sandals rolled up in a towel it felt wet and cold. The star-sprinkled sky, lofting billions of empty miles over her head, panicked her with its aloofness from her own microscopic insignificance. Oh, blessed civilization and the flattering barricades of pigmy architecture, which has made us afraid of the supernal majesty of our first home! . . . The woods around her were full of moving shadows and the whisper of tiny scuttering feet, the flutter of a miniature cosmos hunting and fighting and dying and marching on. The throbbing wings of an owl passing overhead made her heart leap into her mouth . . .

She lay there aching and fearful, waiting and praying for the sky to pale with the dawn, hating and yet glad of the company of the man who slept peacefully on the other side of the fire. She dozed and woke again, stiff and cold and miserable. Untold ages passed before the roof of the world lightened; other countless aeons went by before the first beams of the sun gilded the topmost leaves of the trees. When the rays reached her they might give her a little warmth, and she would be able to sleep again. A flock of birds whirred cheeping across the faded stars. The golden radiance on the tree-tops crept down with maddening slowness . . .

When her eyes opened again it was broad daylight. The fire had been coaxed to life again. It crackled and hissed cheerily, while Simon Templar bent over it on one knee and juggled with the billy and a sizzling frying-pan.

"Eight o'clock and a lovely morning, Belinda," he said.

The fragrance of boiling coffee came to her nostrils, and she felt half sick with hunger and sleeplessness. She pulled herself up, instinctively searching for comb and mirror; and what she saw in the glass horrified her.

"I must get a wash," she said.

He passed her a cake of soap.

"The bath's right on the doorstep, and breakfast will be ready in five minutes."

The cold water nipped her face

and hands, but it freshened her. Afterwards she dealt ravenously with scrambled eggs and two slices of the coarse black bread, and smoked a cigarette with her coffee. When it was done, the Saint climbed to his feet and stretched himself.

"I'll make the beds," he said. "It's your turn to wash up."

She looked resentfully at the pan, slimy with the congealed yellowness of egg, and shuddered.

"How do you expect me to do that?" she asked dangerously.

"It's easy enough. I'll show you."

He led the way down the bank to the edge of the stream. He scooped a handful of earth into the pan, plucked up a tuft of grass by the roots, and held the two things out to her.

"Scrub the earth around with the grass, and repeat until clean. Rinse and dry."

All her hatred and disgust was seething up again, but she tried to keep her balance. To lose her temper was the worst way to go about undermining his insolent assurance.

"There are limits," she said, as evenly as she could, "and I think you've reached them."

"Hadn't it occurred to you that dishes have to be washed?"

"It hadn't occurred to me that a man could ask me to put my hands into a foul mess like that. But perhaps I still thought you might have some of the more elementary instincts of a gentleman. It was rather an absurd mistake to make, wasn't it?"

"Very," said the Saint carefully. "Especially after last night. As I explained to you—camp chores are split two ways. Can you make a fire?"

"I've never tried."

"Then it's safe to assume you can't. Can you cook?"

"Unfortunately I wasn't brought up in a kitchen."

"In that case you can only make yourself useful by fetching water and washing up. If you like eating scrambled eggs, you can help by cleaning up after them. If you don't like that, you can live on bread and water, which involves no washing. The diet is dull, but you won't starve on it. Let's have it quite clear. You chose to travel this way—"

"I've never regretted anything so much in my life."

"You might have regretted being locked up in a German prison still more. I'm not running a conducted tour with a team of cooks and bottle-washers trailing behind. This is a simple matter of the fair division of labor. There are six more days of it coming, and you may as well try to get through them decently."

"What do you think I am?" she flared. "A working slut like that girl at the inn?"

His eyes met hers steadily.

"I think you're an idle loafer

who ought to learn a little about honest work. I think you've lain so soft all your life that you need some hardship and crude discomfort to catch your spine before it dissolves altogether. Both those things are going to happen to you before we get to Innsbruck. You've ceased to be ornamental; so now you're going to turn into a useful working squaw —and like it!"

"Am I?" she said; and then her open hand struck him across the face.

It was done before she knew what she was doing, an instant after she had knocked the pan spinning out of his light grasp into mid-stream, her thin and ragged self-control bursting like tissue before the intolerable flame of her resentment. The torrent of words came afterwards: she saw him smile quietly, and lashed out in sudden fear at the good-humored white flash of his teeth, but her clenched fist met empty air.

He bent her over his knee and did exactly what he had promised to do, with an impersonal efficiency quite devoid of heat. When he released her she was sobbing with impotent rage and real stinging pain. She turned and ran blindly up the bank; if she had had a knife she would have driven it into his throat, but without it her one idea was to get away. Half unconsciously she found the path which he had pointed out as the one that ran into Austria. There must be a road somewhere further on: there would be cars, someone would give her a lift. Her eyes were hot and swimming with shame and anger.

Then she looked back and saw him following her. She glimpsed his tall figure through the trees, rucksack on back, swinging lithely along without making any effort to overtake her. She plunged on till her lungs were bursting and the agony of her stiffened joints made every step a torture; but he was always the same distance behind, unhurried and inescapable as doom. She had to rest or fall down. "Go away? Go away!" she cried, and struggled on with her heart pounding.

The trees thinned out, and she saw telegraph poles on the other side of a field. She ran out into the road. A truck was coming towards her, headed south; she stood in the middle of the road and waved to it till it stopped.

"Take me wherever you're going!" she babbled. "Take me to Innsbruck! I'll pay you anything you ask!"

The driver looked down at her uncomprehendingly.

"Innsbruck?" He pointed down the road. *"Dorthin; aber es ist sehr weit zu laufen—"*

She pantomimed frantically, trying to make him understand. Why couldn't she speak German? . . . And then the Saint's clear

voice spoke coolly from the side of the road, in the driver's own idiom.

"Permit me to introduce my wife. A little family argument. Please don't bother. She'll get over it."

The driver's mouth and eyes opened in an elaborate *"Ach, so!"* of intelligence, the bottomless sympathy of one woman-ridden male to another. He chuckled, and engaged his gears.

"Verzeihen Sie, mein Herr! Ich habe auch eine Frau!" he flung backwards as he drove on.

Belinda's strength drained out of her. She threw herself down at the side of the road and wept, with her face hidden in her arms. The Saint's quiet voice spoke from above her head like the voice of destiny.

"It's no good, Belinda. You can't run away. Life has caught up with you."

DAYS followed through which she moved in a kind of fog—days of physical exhaustion, dark rooms in inns, meals tastelessly yet ravenously devoured, washing of dishes and ruin of manicured hands, lumpy beds on the bare ground, scorching sun, dust, sweat, rain, and cold. Once, after a day of ceaseless drizzle, when she had to sleep in her sodden clothes on earth that squelched under the flimsy groundsheet, she was certain she must catch pneumonia and die, and felt cruelly injured when the fresh air and healthy life refused even to let her catch a cold in the nose. She had those moods of self-pity when any added affliction would have been welcome, so that she could have looked up to Heaven like Job and protested that no one had ever suffered so much. Self-pity alternated with the hours when her mind was filled with nothing but murderous hatred of the man who was always beside her, calm and unchanging as a mountain, blithely unruffled in good weather and bad. She carried out the tasks he set her because she had no choice; but she swore she would die before he could say he had broken her spirit. At first she washed the frying-pan perfunctorily, and brought it back with scraps of earth still clinging to the stubborn traces of egg: he said nothing about it, but that night he scrambled only two eggs and gave them to her, gray and gritty with the remains of mud she had left.

"That's your ration," he said remorselessly. "If you don't like it, have the pan clean next time."

Next time she finished her scouring with the towel, and when she wanted to wash she tried to take his. He stopped her.

"Egg is grand for the complexion," he said. "But if you object to drying your face on a dishcloth, the usual remedy applies—plus washing the towel."

Sometimes she thought she would steal his knife while he slept and cut his throat: the impulse was there, but she knew she would have been lost without him. Even when the rain had poured all day and everything was drenched, he conjured dry wood out of empty air and had a fire going in no time; he introduced unexpected variety into their simple fare, and robbed orchards for apples with the abandoned enthusiasm of a schoolboy. He was never bad-tempered or at a loss: he smoothed difficulties away without appearing to notice them. For thirty-six hours after her spanking she sulked furiously, but it made no mark on his tranquility. The tension of labored silence slipped perforce into a minimum of essential conversation—strained and hostile on her part, unfailingly natural and good-humored on his. Three days passed before she discovered that his eyes were soundlessly laughing at her.

Nothing is more difficult than for two people to be together every hour of the day and punctiliously ignore each other's existence. Nothing, she found out miserably, can grow more irksome than keeping alive a grudge against the someone who is utterly untroubled by rancor. Sometimes the loneliness of her self-imposed silence welled up on her so that she could have shrieked aloud for relief. Imperceptibly, the minimum of essential remarks seemed to increase. Every detail of their daily life became an excuse for some trivial speech which it was torment to resist. She found herself chattering for a quarter of an hour about the pros and cons of boiled and fried onions.

And then came the incredible night when she slept straight through until morning, and woke up contented. For a while the feeling baffled her, and she lay on her back and puzzled about it.

And then it dawned on her in a surprising flash. She was no longer tired! They had covered twenty miles the previous day, by the Saint's reckoning, and yet her limbs felt supple and relaxed, and her feet were not sore. Had they chosen an exceptionally soft piece of ground on which to camp, or had her body learned to adapt itself to the unyielding couch as well as to the abrupt changes from heat to cold? She could not understand it, but the night lay behind her as an interval of unbroken rest, blissful as a child's or a wild animal's. The consciousness of her surroundings came to her with a sense of shock. They had rolled into their blankets high up on a wooded slope on the southern shore of the Achensee: from where she lay she could see fragments of the placid waters of the lake gleaming like splinters of pale blue

grass between the trees. On her left, the woods curved up and away in a rich green rolling train to the mighty shoulders of a white-capped peak that took the morning light to its brow in glistening magnificence. When she looked directly upwards, nothing came between her gaze and the arching tent of the sky where three fluffy white clouds floated slowly eastwards with the red glow of the recent sunrise catching them like the reflection of a fire. She had never really seen a sky before, or the glory of trees and rolling hills.

Belinda drank in a picture of unimagined beauty whose very strangeness made it unforgettable. In truth it was nothing scenically startling, not in any way the kind of view to which tourist excursions are run: it was only an odd corner of the natural splendor of the world, all of which is beautiful. But it was the first corner of the world to which her eyes had ever been opened with emotion, a starting point of undreamed-of experience which must be forever as unique as all beginnings. Dazed with it as if she had awakened on a different planet, she climbed out of her blankets at last and searched mechanically for comb and mirror. The reflection that met her eyes seemed like the portrait of a stranger. Wind and sun had tinted a delicate gold into her skin, and there was a soft flush in her cheeks that had never been there before unless she dabbed it on. Her lips were riper, her eyes clearer and brighter than she had ever thought Nature could make them. She was entranced with herself.

She put her bare feet on the grass, and the sweet touch of the dew on them made the rest of her body aware of being soiled and sticky. Reluctant to separate her toes from the green coolness, and yet eager to perfect that physical joyousness in every way, she strapped on her sandals. In the days before that, she realized with amazement, she had been too weary, too numb with self-pity, to care about anything but superficial cleanliness.

She dug out the soap and went down to the lake shore, carrying her towel. What a perfume there was in the chill of the air, what a friendly peace in the stillness of earth and sky! She stood on the road by the shore and looked to her left towards the sleeping white houses of Pertisau, the specks of gaudily striped cafe parasols on the lakeside terraces; and it was like looking at the vanguard of an invasion, and she was a savage come down from the clean hills to gaze in wonder at this outpost of civilization.

She stripped off her clothes and washed, and swam out a little way into the crystal water. It was very cold, but when she had dried herself she was tingling.

She went up the hill again slowly, filled with an extraordinary happiness. She had no more envy of those people who were sleeping in soft beds half a mile away, who would presently rise and straggle down to eat their breakfasts in stuffy dining-rooms. How much they were missing—how much she had missed!

Breakfast . . . She was hungry, in a clear, keen way that matched the air. She delved into the Saint's pack for food, picked up the frying pan and inspected it. The fire was out, and when she turned over the heap of fuel beside it the wood was damp. How did one kindle a fire?

Simon Templar rolled over and opened his eyes. He hitched himself up on one elbow.

"Hullo—am I late?" he said, and glanced at his watch. It was half-past six.

Belinda saw him with a start. She had forgotten . . . she hated him, didn't she? She remembered that she was still holding the frying-pan, and dropped it guiltily.

"It's about breakfast-time," she said. Her mouth felt clumsy. Odd, how hard it had become to make every word as impersonal and distant as she had trained herself to do—to convey with every sentence that she only spoke to him because she had to.

He threw off his blankets, and dived back into them again to return with two handfuls of twigs.

"Always sleep with some firewood and keep it dry," he explained.

In a few seconds flames were licking up among the dead ashes, steaming the moisture from the other wood as he built it up around his tinder in a neat cone. He gathered the eggs together, and one of them escaped from his corral and went rolling down the hill. He ran after it, grabbed for it, and caught his toe on the projecting root of a tree: the chase ended in a headlong plunge and a complete somersault which brought him up with his back to the bole of a young sapling. There was something so comical about him as he sat there, with the rescued ovum triumphantly clutched in one hand, that Belinda felt a smile tugging at her lips. She fought against it; her chest ached, and the laughter tore at her throat; she gave way because she had to laugh or suffocate, and bowed before the gale. Simon was laughing too. The wall, the precious barrier that she had built up, was crumbling like sand in that tempest of mirth; and she could do nothing to hold it together . . .

Presently she was saying: "Why don't you show me how you do those eggs; then I could take a turn with them."

"It's easy enough when you know how. Like everything else, there's a trick in it. You've got to remember that a scrambled egg goes on cooking itself after you

take it off the fire, so if you try to finish them in the pan they're hard and crumby when you serve them. Take them off while they still look half raw, and they end up just fine and juicy."

She had never enjoyed a meal more in her life; and when it was finished she could not bear to think that they must leave that place almost at once. It was like a reprieve when he announced that his shirt was unspeakable, and they must pause for a washing day. They scrubbed their clothes in pools formed by the tiny waterfall that cascaded close by their camping-ground, and spread them in the sun to dry. It was mid-afternoon before she had to tear herself away: she went down with him to the road feeling newly refreshed and fit for a hundred miles before sundown, yet with the knowledge that she left part of her heart behind up there with the trees and sky.

As they reached the road a band of twenty young people were coming toward them, singing as they came. The men wore leather shorts and white linen shirts; some of the girls wore the same, others wore brief leather skirts. All of them carried packs, and many of the packs were heavy. Belinda saw one man laden with an enormous iron pot and a collection of smoke-blackened pans: he looked like a huge metalized snail.

"Gruss Gott!" cried the leader, breaking the song as he came up with them, in the universal greeting of Tirolese wayfarers; and Simon smiled and answered *"Gruss Gott!"* The others of the party joined in. A couple from the middle fell out and stopped.

"Wohin gehen Sie?" asked the boy—he was little more. Simon told him they were on their way to Jenbach and thence to Innsbruck. "We go also to Jenbach," said the boy. *"Kommen Sie mit!"*

The group re-formed around them, and they went on together, past Seespitz and down the long hill that leads to the Inn valley. Belinda was happy. She was proud to be able to keep up with them tirelessly, and their singing made light of the miles. She was seeing everything as if she had been blind from her birth until that day. At one place a gang of men were working on the road; once she would have passed by without looking at them—they would have been merely common workmen, dirty but necessary cattle to serve the needs of those whose cars used the road. Now she saw them. They were stripped to the waist, bodies muscled like statues and polished with sweat like oil, harmonies of brown skin and blue cotton trousers. One party called *"Gruss Gott!"* to the other, smiling, fellow freemen of the air.

"What does that mean—*Gruss Gott?*" she asked the Saint.

"Greet God," he answered,

and looked at her. "Isn't that only gratitude?"

The boy on her other side spoke a little English. She asked him where they came from and what they were doing.

"We are *Wandervogel.* We are tired of the cities, and we make ourselves gypsies. We sing for money, and work in the fields when we can, and make things to sell. Your sandals—they are a pattern made by the *Wandervogel.* We live now, and some day perhaps we die."

"Are you happy?" she asked; and he looked at her in simple wonder.

"Why not? We do not want to be rich. We have all the world to live in, and we are free like the birds."

They came to Jenbach in the cool of the evening; and again there was an inn. But this time it was different.

"We do not go with you any more," said the boy. "We go to Salzburg. But first we drink to our friendship."

Belinda sat on a wooden bench and recalled the first time she had entered an inn. Then she had been too sick at heart to care whether it was dirty; now she would not have cared for a different reason, though she had learned that the inns were as clean as any room in her own home. Again there was a sunburned laborer sitting in the corner she chose, and the Saint talked with him, and when the serving-girl had distributed a tray-load of tankards she joined them and was chaffed and flirted with. It was the first Gasthof over again; the difference was in Belinda herself. Now she sat alert, eyes sparkling and shifting from one face to another in an attempt to follow the weaving shuttle of their voices; and when they laughed she laughed, pretending she understood. And the background of it all she did understand, without knowing how. There was a community of happiness and contentment, a fellowship and a freemasonry of people whose feet were rooted in the same good earth, a shared and implicit enjoyment of the food and drink and changing seasons, a spontaneous hospitality without self-consciousness, a unity of pagans who had greeted God. Man spoke to man, laughed, jested, holding back none of himself, untroubled by fears and jealousies: having no reason to do otherwise, each took the other immediately for a passing friend. Why not? The world they knew was large enough for them all. Why should not nation and nation meet in the same humanity? And Belinda found she was thinking too much; and she was glad when one man who had carried a mandolin slung across his back took it down and strummed a chord on the wires, and the voices round him rose in unison:

"Trink, trink, Bruderlein, trink,
Lass doch die Sorgen zu
Hause—"

with the others chiming in, beating the tables with their tankards, till they were all singing—

"Meide den Kummer und meide
den Schmerz,
Dann ist das Leben ein Scherz;"

and the repetition rattled the glass in the windows:

"MEIDE DEN KUMMER UND
MEIDE DEN SCHMERZ,
DANN IST DAS LEBEN EIN
SCHERZ!"

Belinda listened; and Hilaire Belloc's lines, memorized parrot-fashion at school, went through her mind with a new haunting meaning: *"Do you remember an inn, Miranda, do you remember an inn?"* . . . That was an inn which she would always remember; and she felt strangely humble when the last strong hand had been shaken and she stood outside alone with Simon Templar under the darkening sky.

"How far is it from here to Innsbruck?" she asked as they walked away from the valley in search of a place to sleep.

"We could do it in one long day by the road, which is rather dull and dusty. Or if we struck out the way we're going, making a detour, it'd be two easy days."

They were following a lonely cart-track, and every scuff of their footsteps sounded as clearly as if they had been alone in the world. A wagon laden with cordwood creaked out of the blue haze, drawn by a horse with a bullock in double harness; the wagoner cracked his whip and bade them good-evening as he went by. Was that a symbol of something? . . . Belinda said: "Those *Wandervogel* must be very happy."

"They belong to a new generation," said the Saint quietly. "There are many people like them here, under different names. It's an attempt to find a way out of the mess this world is in. The cities have failed them, and they're looking back to the ancient wisdom of contentment with simple things. At least it's better than idle hopelessness. And who's to say, maybe they've got something." He looked around him. "Here's grass and a stream and wood to make a fire—shall we make this our camp?"

THEY cooked their food and ate in silence; but it was not the same silence as others that there had been. Belinda was oddly subdued; and Simon knew that his work was done. Afterwards, when it was finished and they sat on over cigarettes and enamel mugs of coffee, they were still quiet. Simon was thinking of other evenings of great peace in his life, as a man does in times of perfect contentment for the

joy of comparing the incomparable; and he thought also of another more perilous adventure which had once taken him over the trail they had retraced. Belinda hugged her knees and gazed into the dancing flames. Why had she never noticed the sweet smell of wood-smoke before? . . . A log rolled over, scattering a small Vesuvius of sparks; and she said: "What are things like where you're going after Innsbruck?"

Simon kicked the log back.

"They're better than anything you've seen yet. I don't think I've ever seen anything more beautiful in the world. It's a little bit like what we saw yesterday and today, only a hundred times more magnificent. Mountains and valleys and woods and streams. You take a trail that runs halfway up the wall of the world. On one side you can look up through the pines to the snow; on the other side you look down into a green valley with cattle grazing and a torrent racing at the bottom. The air's full of the scent of wild flowers and the tinkle of cow-bells. When you first come to it you feel you must just sit and look at it all day, taking it into your soul."

Belinda listened to the murmur of insects in the grass, and everything she had seen that day passed before her in a pageant. At the end she saw the picture that Simon had painted for her. Young men and girls, sun-bronzed and carefree, swung along that trail halfway up the wall of the world, singing. They ate and slept and were happy around camp-fires like this. What a lot of useless desires we clutter up our lives with, she thought, and never know how unimportant they were until they have been almost forgotten! What a mess of stupid formulas and trivialities! She lay on her back and stared up into the overarching fretwork of leaves. There was still something else to be said: it hurt her, but a new pride demanded it.

"I'm sorry I slapped you and wasted so many days," she said. "I'd give anything in the world to have them over again."

He smiled in the firelight.

"I'll apologize for saying you'd ceased to be ornamental. It wasn't true, of course; but I wanted to make you mad. There was only a week, and we had to get the quarreling over and done with. As a matter of fact, you're more decorative than you ever were before."

He was so calm, so natural, that the effort of self-abasement which might have been a wound in her new peace of mind became nothing at all in retrospect. For that moment his unimpassioned understanding and wisdom seemed so godlike that she felt small —not uncomfortably and shamefacedly, but like a child.

"You've done so much for

me," she said, "and yet I know nothing about you."

He laughed.

"I'm just a rogue and a vagabond. Sometimes I'm enjoying a rest like this, sometimes I'm in much worse trouble. You'd only know me from my unlawful exploits, if you read about things like that. I throw my weight about and have no end of fun. Sometimes I steal." He turned his blue eyes on her, and they danced. "I stole your bag in Munich."

She was too astounded even to gasp.

"You stole my bag?"

"Money and passport and letter of credit and everything. They're at the bottom of my pack now. And I spread some gorgeous rumors about you to the bank and the hotel and the consulate so that you wouldn't be able to get any help—which explains why they were so nasty and suspicious. It was the only way I could get you in such a jam that you'd simply have to make this trip with me."

She made no reply for a while; and then she said: "Why should you take so much trouble over anyone like I was?"

"It was hardly any trouble to me," he said, "and I thought you were worth it. The way you were going, you were all set to make Jack thoroughly unhappy and break up both your lives. Jack said you'd never forgive him if he tried to get tough with you, but I figured it wouldn't do either of you so much harm if you never forgave me. All the same, I'm rather glad you have."

Belinda bit her lip.

She was quiet again, very quiet, until they rolled into their blankets and went to sleep; and Simon let her be. Two more days, she told herself when she awoke; but the time went flying. One more night and a day—a day—three hours—two! . . . Everything she saw printed itself on her mind with the feeling that she was leaving it forever. A boy driving a herd of cattle, slim, blond-haired, with transparent blue eyes and a merry smile. A castle built on a steep hill, hanging aloft in a solid curtain of pines like a picture nailed to a wall. The crucified Christs set up by every path and roadside and in many fields, with bunches of wild flowers stuck in the crevices of the carving—"They're thank-offerings," said the Saint. "People going by put the flowers on them for luck." Belinda picked a handful of narcissi and arranged them behind the outstretched arms of one figure; it seemed a pleasant thing to do. She would never pass that way again, and she must remember everything before she was outlawed from her strange paradise . . . And then the last hour, and the inn at Hall; where Simon left her on some pretext, and telephoned a mes-

sage to the address in Innsbruck which Jack Easton had given him. Goodbye, goodbye! And she saw Innsbruck and the end of the journey with a pang. It was so short, like a little life which had to be laid down at its peak.

And then, somehow, relentlessly jarred out of the dream into a cold light of commonplace, she was sitting in a beer garden in Innsbruck with Jack Easton patting her hand.

"I was wrong, too, Belinda," he was saying. "This great open space stuff isn't all it's cracked up to be. One day we were being broiled alive, and the next it was pouring with rain and we were soaked. God, and those country inns! Always the same food, and sanitary arrangements straight out of the Stone Age . . ."

She scarcely heard him at first. It was as if he spoke a foreign language. She was looking up at the mountains that girdle the town, which can be seen from every corner, looming above the house-tops like the bastions of a gigantic fortress, the gates of the trail that ran halfway up the wall of the world.

"Jack, I was the only one who was wrong. But we're going on with Simon just like this, over the Alps into Italy."

Easton shook his head.

"Nothing doing," he stated firmly. "I've had my share, and I could do with some hot baths and civilized meals for a change. We'll rent an automobile and drive over if you like."

Unbelieving, she stared at him. She had never seen him before. Clean, carefully and inconspicuously dressed, smoothly pink-faced, the embryo of a stolid pillar of the civilized state. She looked down at herself, travel-stained and not caring. At the people around — townspeople mostly, sprinkled with tourists. They were like utter strangers; she looked at them with a queer pride, a pride in the dust and stains of the road that had become part of her, in which they had no part. She looked at Simon Templar, brown and dusty and strong like herself, sitting there with an amazed and motionless foreboding in his eyes. *He* was real. He belonged. Belonged back there under the wide reaches of the sky that she had once thought so terrible and comfortless, which now was the only ceiling of peace.

"Darling, your nose is peeling," said Jack Easton jovially; and something that had been in her, which had grown dim and vague in the passing of seven days, was suddenly lifeless, dying without pain.

"No, no, no!" she cried, with her heart aching and awake. "Simon, I can't go back. I can never go back!"

the marriner murder

by . . . Q. Patrick

He'd grinned at her, amused, earlier that night. And then she'd gone back to her cabin to sleep, and met a murderer.

YOUNG Lieutenant Trant of the New York Homicide Bureau sat in the lounge of the S. S. *Queen Anne,* feeling bored. Around him passengers were chattering and dancing in a mood of mid-Atlantic festivity. After a month's vacation in Europe, Trant was tired of frivolity. His one authentic enthusiasm—his passion for murderers—had been starved.

He watched the dancers, hoping rather wistfully that one of them would drop dead under mysterious circumstances.

The lounge steward brought the drink he had ordered. "Here we are, sir."

"Thanks, Jimmie."

The steward, with his sun-bleached hair and lazy smile, was the dream boy of the female tourists and knew it. He was also colorfully informed as to the ship's gossip. Trant, who took an unorthodox interest in the back-stairs of life, had made the Yorkshire-born steward his particular crony.

"How's our girl friend and company tonight, Jimmie?"

Timothy Tregaskis Trant, Princeton '35 (Phi Beta Kappa), frequently reported on by Q. Patrick, apparently joined the N. Y. Police ("Homicide Division") in 1935. His hobbies are described as Italian art—and collecting necktics. And his peculiarities—"sartorial elegance, fondness for murderesses."

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He nodded across the lounge to a corner table where two young men and two girls with suntanned backs were making a stormy but striking quartet.

"Miss Marriner's party, sir?" Jimmie's speech and manner would have done credit to a duke. "They seem a little edgy, sir. I'm afraid trouble may be brewing again."

"Trouble," remarked Lieutenant Trant, studying the blonder of the two backs appreciatively, "is something which Miss Mavis Marriner carries around like a pocketbook."

Jimmie grinned. "She is a bit of what you might call a magnet, sir."

"A magnet for males."

Trant alerted, for at the other side of the lounge the blonde had risen in apparent pique and a cloud of turquoise taffeta. Turning the suntanned back contemptuously on her companions, she skirted the dancers and made her way to Trant's table. She sat down and gave him a blinding smile which she then switched to Jimmie.

"Jimmie, darling, be an angel and get me a drink." As the steward hurried off, Mavis Marriner, England's newest, prettiest, and probably least talented movie star, moaned: "Darling, be nice to me. I'm having a foul evening and you're the only bearable male on the ship."

Lieutenant Trant, whose taste in women was also unorthodox, felt a certain weakness for Mavis Marriner although, apart from a torrid physical appeal, she had nothing to recommend her. She was both silly and selfish and, although she worked overtime to make every man in love with her, she remained—he was sure—technically as virtuous as a police matron. He found it hard to tell why she moved him. Perhaps it was her youth or perhaps in her he saw the classic example of a murderee.

"What's the trouble tonight, Mavis?" His lean young face was mildly amused.

She shrugged. "My dear, so positively stupid! Just because that divine Larry Howard—he's a great Hollywood producer now, you know—happens to be interested in my career, Armand smolders, my dear, as if he was the Bull of Bashan. And that revolting Claire Howard! She thinks I'm trying to steal her husband. So absurd, I mean!"

From this rambling statement, the experienced police officer in Trant deduced that Mavis Marriner, who was engaged to the French movie actor, Armand Bardou, had been vamping the multimillionaire playboy, Larry Howard, thus infuriating both Howard's recent fourth wife and her own fiancé.

This was, in fact, a typical Mavis Marriner evening.

"Really," continued Mavis,

batting her huge lashes and looking almost unbearably luscious, "jealous people are so dismal. Darling, let's dance."

Mavis' dancing was an expert seduction. Sinuous in Trant's arms and headily perfumed with *Tantalizing,* she murmured:

"You really are intriguing. So mysterious. I'm sure you do something frightfully fascinating."

Trant, who knew he was being exploited merely to make Armand Bardou and the "divine" Larry Howard that much more dismally jealous, grinned at her affectionately.

"I'm a mere nobody. Clay in the potter's hands."

They went back to the table. Jimmie had brought Mavis a menthe frappé. Mavis dazzled at him.

"Jimmie, you're a duck. And don't forget the milk tonight. With just a spoonful of brandy as usual. At one o'clock."

Jimmie, all ducal gallantry, said: "Of course, Miss Marriner."

Mavis turned to Trant. "Jimmie's so sweet. Every night he leaves a glass of milk and brandy outside my stateroom—like a gnome. It helps me sleep. Darling, let's dance again."

Mavis danced long and shamelessly enough with Trant to drive her companions, one after the other, from the lounge. Having achieved her objective, she withdrew in pursuit of other game. It was just after two when Trant finally escaped to his cabin from a relentless chess game with the captain. As he climbed into bed, the boat, which had been quiet all evening, gave an eccentric lurch, toppling his traveling clock onto the floor. He bent to pick it up and thought of Mavis as a stormy sea, toppling everyone she met off balance.

Soon he drifted into pleasant dreams of suntanned backs and *crime passionelle. . . .*

He awoke next morning at nine to a voice booming eerily over the loud-speakers:

"Miss Mavis Marriner. Miss Mavis Marriner, report to the bridge at once."

A moment later the chief mate appeared anxiously to announce that the captain wanted him in Mavis' cabin. When they reached it, they found the captain alone, looking grim.

"I think I'm going to need a policeman's help, Trant. She's gone."

He told Trant what he knew. The stewardess who brought Mavis' morning tea at seven had found the cabin empty and locked. She was familiar with all of Mavis' clothes and was sure that none of them were missing except the black silk pajamas in which she slept. A discreet search of the liner had not yet located her.

The captain dismissed the mate, saying: "Tell Mr. Spiwack

on the bridge that, if there's no word in ten minutes, he's to turn the ship around and retrace our course." He added to Trant: "Regulations. Naturally we'll never find her if . . ."

Trant, silent but bright-eyed, was gazing around the cabin. The bed was neatly made. The cover of the aft porthole was loose, flapping slightly back and forth. The turquoise dress in which Mavis had danced the night before was slung over a chair. There was an overpowering—even for Mavis—odor of *Tantalizing*. A glance at the dressing table showed a bottle of perfume almost empty. Intrigued, Trant traced the odor to an area by the bed where it seemed at its strongest. He dropped to his knees and observed a faint stain on the flowered carpet. It was still a trifle damp.

"Blood?" queried the captain melodramatically.

"I don't think so. Mind if I ruin the company's rug?" Without waiting for the captain's consent, Trant produced a pocketknife and cut a small circular patch from the carpet.

The purser came in and announced: "The entire ship has been searched, sir. No trace of her."

Trant folded the piece of carpet into one of the company's envelopes, which he took from the desk, and moved to the porthole.

"The cover was this way when the stewardess brought the tea?"

"Nothing's been touched."

Trant hooked back the loose cover and studied the port. He gave a little grunt.

"Look."

At his shoulder, the captain peered. Caught on the metal edge was a scrap of black fabric.

"Black silk," said the captain, awed. "Her pajamas. So she's overboard. Suicide."

Trant put the shred of material into another envelope, feeling a cosmic pity for Mavis Marriner and all other foolish young women who reap what they sow. He also felt guilt at having had his frivolous wish of the night before so speedily granted.

"Unfortunately, it's not suicide. No girl could have squeezed herself through that porthole with the heavy cover flapping loose. Try it yourself. She couldn't have unhooked it by accident, either, as she went through."

The captain stared. "So it's murder?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Trant sadly.

But only part of him was sad. The other part was musing on Mavis Marriner's murderer as a hungry owl might muse on a mouse. . . .

At that moment the chief steward appeared with a fraught-looking middle-aged stewardess. He said to the captain: "Mrs.

Kuzak, the night stewardess, has something to report, sir."

In an explosive Polish accent, Mrs. Kuzak affirmed: "Last night at one-thirty flickers the call light of Miss Marriner. I come to this cabin. I knock. Answers a man's voice: *'Is all right. Only Miss Marriner has trouble with the porthole. Now is fixed.'* I said: *'Okay.'* I leave."

"One-thirty." Trant watched her. "What was the voice like?"

"From a foreign land. Not of English. Heavy with accent."

The captain whistled. "She was engaged to that Frenchman."

Trant made no comment. He stepped out into the corridor and glanced at the little ledge by the cabin door. A full glass of milk stood there. He sniffed it and smelt the odor of brandy.

"Get Jimmie, the lounge steward," he said to the hovering purser. "And if he's got a cabin mate, bring him, too. To save time."

The purser returned shortly, accompanied by Jimmie, who looked sleepy with ruffled blond hair, and a large dark man with tattooed forearms.

Trant said: "When did you bring the milk, Jimmie?"

"At one, sir. Like always, sir."

"Did you knock?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Miss Marriner answered?"

"Yes, sir. She told me to leave the milk on the ledge as usual and said good night, sir."

"You heard no other voice in the cabin?"

"No, sir."

"Did Miss Marriner sound at all different from usual?"

"No, sir."

"What did you do after you'd left the milk?"

"My work was over. I went to my cabin, sir."

Trant glanced at the dark cabin mate. "You check that?"

"Yes, sir. I woke up when Jimmie came in, sir. We sat a while talking."

"What time was it?"

"Just after one, sir." He glanced at a large silver watch on his tattooed wrist. "I looked at my watch when I woke up."

"Since she never came out to get the milk, her visitor must have come very soon after one. Almost certainly she was dead before one-thirty and certainly the voice Mrs. Kuzak heard was the voice of the murderer." Trant reflected. "I'm going to need an assistant, Captain. Can I have Jimmie?"

"Naturally."

Trant patted Jimmie's arm. "Rout out Mr. and Mrs. Howard and Mr. Armand Bardou. Tell them the captain wants to see them in his cabin. And use that well-known tact. . . ."

The ship was futilely retracing its course as Trant and the captain questioned the three prin-

cipal suspects. Trant seemed to find the interviews boring.

Mrs. Claire Howard, a vivid red-headed ex-actress with a knife for a tongue, said:

"I'm prostrated by grief. I couldn't be sorrier if the python at the Bronx Zoo kicked the bucket."

Although she made no effort to conceal her resentment of Mavis' behavior with her husband, she was firmly alibied by the testimony of an elderly Italian prima donna who swore she had been telling Mrs. Howard's fortune in the Howard stateroom between one and one-thirty.

Larry Howard was more conventionally distressed than his wife. He fussed with his hand-painted tie, looked more like a movie idol than any of the stars on his payroll and kept repeating: "So tragic—such a lovely girl—such a talent—"

He too had what seemed like a perfect alibi. After leaving the lounge the night before, he had run into a Hollywood script writer and had spent the significant time period in the writer's cabin, discussing an idea for a supercolossal Marriner vehicle—which now would have to be tailored to suit another star. The script writer corroborated this.

After these two had apparently cleared themselves, Armand Bardou was pitifully without defense. The elegant, mournful-eyed French actor denied having been in Mavis' cabin but had absolutely no alibi. All he could say for himself was that, humiliated by his fiancée's shameless flirtation with Larry Howard, he had paced the upper deck for hours in an attempt to console himself.

"But Mavis was my heart," he announced with Gallic fervor. "You cannot accuse me of murdering my heart."

After he had gone, Trant no longer looked bored. In fact, there was a gleam of pleasurable anticipation in his eyes. The captain said: "Well, I suppose we're left with Bardou. No alibi—foreign accent."

"Foreign accents can be assumed," suggested Trant mildly. "And it's too early to talk of alibis."

"You mean we're not restricted to the suspects we've questioned? Anyone else on the boat could have killed her?"

"They could have killed her," agreed Trant, "but they didn't."

"Trant, you're not telling me you know who did."

"Oh, yes," murmured Trant with an exasperatingly casual shrug, "I've suspected it for half an hour. Now I'm sure—"

The captain, who was a long-suffering man, fell in with Trant's requests. They were simple. First the lieutenant wanted to inspect the ship's log. Having done so, he wanted to interview the three suspects individually in Mavis' cabin. While the purser

went off to arrange this, Trant stationed Mrs. Kuzak, the Polish night stewardess, in the little pantry opposite the half-open door of the stateroom. He told her to listen to everything that was said in the cabin and to break in if she heard the foreign voice she had heard the night before. Once she was at her post, Trant and Jimmie went into the cabin. Trant sat down by the bed, lit a cigarette and offered one to the steward.

"Mr. Howard's coming first, Jimmie. Before he arrives, I want you to duck into the bathroom. Don't come out till I call."

"Okay, sir."

Trant's gray eyes moved to the porthole. "Jimmie, you've had plenty of experience with women crossing the Atlantic. You can help me on a point of psychology. A lot of them throw their bonnets to the sea breezes, don't they?"

Jimmie grinned. "They're apt to be in a holiday mood, sir."

"Exactly. But Mavis was different. That's the point about her. She vamped like Salome but when the time came to crash through, it's my hunch she went colder than a Pilgrim Mother."

"That's how we crew members had her summed up, sir."

"All right, Jimmie, before Mr. Howard arrives, let's assume for a moment that I'm the murderer." Trant smiled contentedly at this hypothesis. "Miss Marriner certainly hurled her all at me last night. Suppose I'd taken her up on it and come here to the cabin expecting a Big Romantic Moment. What would I have got? The old don't - touch - me - you - nasty-man. Suppose I was vain, used to easy conquests. Suppose I got rough. Suppose she rang for the stewardess. Suppose I realized what an awkward spot I'd be in if the stewardess reported an attempted assault to the captain. Say I struggled with Mavis trying to keep her from calling out when the stewardess knocked, planning to reason with her later and calm her down. O.K. The stewardess came. I invented some trouble with the porthole to explain the ring and to get rid of her. But later—after the stewardess had gone—I realized to my horror that I had been rougher than I thought. I had strangled Miss Marriner."

Trant looked meditatively at his own hands as if they were the hands of a strangler.

"There was Miss Marriner lying on the bed—dead. I hadn't intended to kill her, but it was done. I got into a panic. I thought of the porthole. Surely, if I pushed the body through the porthole, they might think it was suicide. I carried her to the port and pushed her through. But I was nervous. As I brought my hands in, I unhooked the porthole cover without noticing it. All I wanted to do was to get the heck away

from the cabin as fast as I could. I hadn't been a very smart murderer, but then I hadn't planned to be a murderer at all. How's that fit, Jimmie?"

Jimmie's blue eyes had widened. "It fits, sir. But what about the foreign accent?"

"Oh, I left out a couple of details. The accent, for example—and the spilled perfume." Trant nodded to the little hole in the carpet. "The perfume's simple. There was a stain on the rug, a most incriminating stain. Although the murderer was rattled, he knew he had to remove it. He thought that perfume, with its alcoholic content, would be more effective than water so he tried to wipe it away with *Tantalizing*. I'm afraid he didn't succeed. When we reach New York, a laboratory analysis will show what it was."

"What was it, sir?"

Lieutenant Trant rose. Suddenly he seemed depressed.

"Milk," he said.

"Milk?"

"Milk and brandy brought in by the murderer. I'm afraid he was a rather vain murderer. As the glamour boy of the *Queen Anne*, he was used to conquests. He thought that Mavis, with her 'darlings' and 'angels,' should be as much of a pushover as the others. It must have been humiliating when he came into this cabin last night as a Don Juan to find that Mavis just thought of him as a fresh steward. It was frightening, too, to know that she was going to report him to the captain. That would have meant a quick end to his career."

Jimmie sprang to his feet.

"I know what you're going to say," continued Trant quietly. "The glass of milk on the ledge outside proves that you never came into this cabin last night. Unhappily, it doesn't prove that. The ship's log reports that we ran into a violent squall last night at two. The boat rolled. In fact, it toppled the clock off my dressing table. If you'd actually left that glass of milk on the ledge at one last night, it would certainly have spilled."

He studied Jimmie with a thoughtful expression. "You put the new glass of milk there this morning. Last night's glass was spilled on the carpet in here while you struggled with Miss Marriner to keep her from calling out to the stewardess. You thought you were being clever planting the second glass on the ledge. I am afraid your cleverness backfired.

"And I'm afraid your neat alibi can be broken too. Your cabin mate said he woke up when you came in. He woke up because you deliberately awakened him, didn't he? But before you awakened him, you switched the hands of his watch backwards. It was easy to stay awake yourself until he fell asleep again and then to

turn the hands forward to the correct time."

It was painful to see Jimmie collapse under this swift, deadly attack. The young steward's ducal composure fled and with it his elegant accent. He was a frightened little mill boy again and, lapsing into a broad Yorkshire dialect, he cried:

"Yer caan't say thaat a' me, zur. She war crazed fur me. She aasked me ter coom oop. Ah didn't knaw— Ah didn't meean ter—"

Mrs. Kuzak burst into the cabin. "That's it!" she announced. "Is the same foreign voice I hear last night."

Jimmie swung to her. "Eh, wumman, ye caan't—"

"That's all we needed," interrupted Trant quietly. "People almost always revert to their natural dialect when they're rattled, Jimmie. No wonder Mrs. Kuzak thought that Yorkshire brogue of yours was a foreign accent."

He nodded the stewardess out of the cabin. Alone with Jimmie, he felt a twinge of sadness. The hunt was always exciting; the kill never so. Particularly when he was fond of the murderer.

He said: "You didn't mean to kill her. I'm sure of that and I'll do everything I can. . . . I'm sorry, Jimmie. I set a trap for you. I feel like a heel."

Jimmie had managed to turn himself into the perfect steward again. He smiled a ghost of his engaging smile.

"That's all right, sir. After all, it's your job, sir."

There were times when Lieutenant Trant took a low view of his profession.

This was one of them.

NEXT MONTH—

Lawrence G. Blochman's KISS OF KANDAHAR

T. S. Stribling's SUGGESTION OF DEATH

Melville Davisson Post's THE HIDDEN LAW

Clifford Knight's THE SERGEANT AND THE SKUNKS

E. Phillips Oppenheim's THE GHOSTS OF SUICIDE CORNER

and

THE EVER-LOVING SPOUSE

A NEW SAINT STORY by LESLIE CHARTERIS

—in THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

blind man's hood

by . . . Carter Dickson

She had been murdered where there was no one to kill her—and no one could have done it.

ALTHOUGH one snowflake had already sifted past the lights, the great doors of the house stood open. It seemed less a snowflake than a shadow; for a bitter wind whipped after it, and the doors creaked. Inside, Rodney and Muriel Hunter could see a dingy, narrow hall paved in dull red tiles, with a Jacobean staircase at the rear. (At that time, of course, there was no dead woman lying inside.)

To find such a place in the loneliest part of the Weald of Kent — a seventeenth-century country house whose floors had grown humped and its beams scrubbed by the years—was what they had expected. Even to find electricity was not surprising. But Rodney Hunter thought he had seldom seen so many lights in one house, and Muriel had been wondering about it ever since their car turned the bend in the road. "Clearlawns" lived up to its name. It stood in the midst of a slope of flat grass, now wiry white with frost, and there was no tree or shrub within twenty yards of it. Those lights con-

Carter Dickson, equally well known as John Dickson Carr, occupies a unique place in the field. We've heard of no disagreement with Leslie Charteris' own reaction that, "In the field of the finest and purest type of puzzle, the incomparably best stories I have ever read are those of Carter Dickson."

From: Carter Dickson's THE DEPARTMENT OF QUEER COMPLAINTS.
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trasted with a certain inhospitable and damp air about the house, as though the owner were compelled to keep them burning.

"But why is the front door *open?*" insisted Muriel.

In the drive-way, the engine of their car coughed and died. The house was now a secret blackness of gables, emitting light at every chink, and silhouetting the stalks of the wisteria vines which climbed it. On either side of the front door were little-paned windows whose curtains had not been drawn. Towards their left they could see into a low dining-room, with table and sideboard set for a cold supper; towards their right was a darkish library moving with the reflections of a bright fire.

The sight of the fire warmed Rodney Hunter, but it made him feel guilty. They were very late. At five o'clock, without fail, he had promised Jack Bannister, they would be at "Clearlawns" to inaugurate the Christmas party.

Engine-trouble in leaving London was one thing; idling at a country pub along the way, drinking hot ale and listening to the wireless sing carols until a sort of Dickensian jollity stole into you, was something else. But both he and Muriel were young; they were very fond of each other and of things in general; and they had worked themselves into a glow of Christmas, which—as they stood before the creaking doors of "Clearlawns" — grew oddly cool.

There was no real reason, Rodney thought, to feel disquiet. He hoisted their luggage, including a big box of presents for Jack and Molly's children out of the rear of the car. That his footsteps should sound loud on the gravel was only natural. He put his head into the doorway and whistled. Then he began to bang the knocker. Its sound seemed to seek out every corner of the house and then come back like a questing dog; but there was no response.

"I'll tell you something else," he said. "There's nobody in the house."

Muriel ran up the three steps to stand beside him. She had drawn her fur coat close around her, and her face was bright with cold.

"But that's impossible!" she said. "I mean, even if they're out, the servants—! Molly told me she keeps a cook and two maids. Are you sure we've got the right place?"

"Yes. The name's on the gate, and there's no other house within a mile."

With the same impulse they craned their necks to look through the windows of the dining-room on the left. Cold fowl on the sideboard, a great bowl of chestnuts; and, now they could see it, another good fire, before which stood a chair with a piece

of knitting put aside on it. Rodney tried the knocker again, vigorously, but the sound was all wrong. It was as though they were even more lonely in that core of light, with the east wind rushing across the Weald, and the door creaking again.

"I suppose we'd better go in," said Rodney. He added, with a lack of Christmas spirit: "Here, this is a devil of a trick! What do you think has happened? I'll swear that fire has been made up in the last fifteen minutes."

He stepped into the hall and set down the bags. As he was turning to close the door, Muriel put her hand on his arm.

"I say, Rod. Do you think you'd better close it?"

"Why not?"

"I—I don't know."

"The place is getting chilly enough as it is," he pointed out, unwilling to admit that the same thought had occurred to him. He closed both doors and shot their bar into place; and at the same moment, a girl came out of the door to the library on the right.

She was such a pleasant-faced girl that they both felt a sense of relief. Why she had not answered the knocking had ceased to be a question; she filled a void. She was pretty, not more than twenty-one or two, and had an air of primness which made Rodney Hunter vaguely associate her with a governess or a secretary, though Jack Bannister had never mentioned any such person. She was plump, but with a curiously narrow waist; and she wore brown. Her brown hair was neatly parted, and her brown eyes—long eyes, which might have given a hint of secrecy or curious smiles if they had not been so placid—looked concerned. In one hand she carried what looked like a small white bag of linen or cotton. And she spoke with a dignity which did not match her years.

"I am terribly sorry," she told them. "I *thought* I heard someone, but I was so busy that I could not be sure. Will you forgive me?"

She smiled. Hunter's private view was that his knocking had been loud enough to wake the dead; but he murmured conventional things. As though conscious of some faint incongruity about the white bag in her hand, she held it up.

"For Blind Man's Bluff," she explained. "They do cheat so, I'm afraid, and not only the children. If one uses an ordinary handkerchief tied round the eyes, they always manage to get a corner loose. But if you take this, and you put it fully over a person's head, and you tied it round the neck"—a sudden gruesome image occurred to Rodney Hunter—"then it works so much better, don't you think?" Her eyes seemed to turn inward, and to grow absent. "But I must not

keep you talking here. You are—"

"My name is Hunter. This is my wife. I'm afraid we've arrived late, but I understood Mr. Bannister was expecting—"

"He did not tell you?" asked the girl in brown.

"Tell me what?"

"Everyone here, including the servants, is always out of the house at this hour on this particular date. It is the custom; I believe it has been the custom for more than sixty years. There is some sort of special church service."

Rodney Hunter's imagination had been devising all sorts of fantastic explanations: the first of them being that this demure lady had murdered the members of the household, and was engaged in disposing of the bodies. What put this nonsensical notion into his head he could not tell, unless it was his own profession of detective-story writing. But he felt relieved to hear a commonplace explanation. Then the woman spoke again.

"Of course, it is a pretext, really. The rector, that dear man, invented it all those years ago to save embarrassment. What happened here had nothing to do with the murder, since the dates were so different; and I suppose most people have forgotten now why the tenants *do* prefer to stay away during seven and eight o'clock on Christmas Eve. I doubt if Mrs. Bannister even knows the real reason, though I should imagine Mr. Bannister must know it. But what happens here cannot be very pleasant, and it wouldn't do to have the children see it—would it?"

Muriel spoke with such sudden directness that her husband knew she was afraid. "Who are you?" Muriel said. "And what on earth are you talking about?"

"I am quite sane, really," their hostess assured them, with a smile that was half-cheery and half-coy. "I dare say it must be all very confusing to you, poor dear. But I am forgetting my duties. Please come in and sit down before the fire, and let me offer you something to drink."

She took them into the library on the right, going ahead with a walk that was like a bounce, and looking over her shoulder out of those long eyes. The library was a long, low room with beams. The windows towards the road were uncurtained; but those in the side-wall, where a faded red-brick fireplace stood were bay windows with draperies closed across them. As their hostess put them before the fire, Hunter could have sworn he saw one of the draperies move.

"You need not worry about it," she assured him, following his glance towards the bay. "Even if you looked in there, you might not see anything now. I believe some gentleman did try it once,

a long time ago. He stayed in the house for a wager. But when he pulled the curtain back, he did not see anything in the bay—at least, anything quite. He felt some hair, and it moved. That is why they have so many lights nowadays."

Muriel had sat down on a sofa, and was lighting a cigarette; to the rather prim disapproval of their hostess, Hunter thought.

"May we have a hot drink?" Muriel asked crisply. "And then, if you don't mind, we might walk over and meet the Bannisters coming from church."

"Oh, please don't do that!" cried the other. She had been standing by the fireplace, her hands folded and turned outwards. Now she ran across to sit down beside Muriel; and the swiftness of her movement, no less than the touch of her hand on Muriel's arm, made the latter draw back.

Hunter was now completely convinced that their hostess was out of her head. Why she held such fascination for him, though, he could not understand. In her eagerness to keep them there, the girl had come upon a new idea. On a table behind the sofa, bookends held a row of modern novels. Conspicuously displayed—probably due to Molly Bannister's tact—were two of Rodney Hunter's detective stories. The girl put a finger on them.

"May I ask you if you wrote these?"

He admitted it.

"Then," she said with sudden composure, "it would probably interest you to hear about the murder. It was a most perplexing business, you know; the police could make nothing of it, and no one ever has been able to solve it." An arresting eye fixed on his. "It happened out in the hall there. A poor woman was killed where there was no one to kill her, and no one could have done it. But she was murdered."

Hunter started to get up from his chair; then he changed his mind, and sat down again. "Go on," he said.

"You must forgive me if I am a little uncertain about dates," she urged. "I think it was in the early eighteen-seventies, and I am sure it was in early February —because of the snow. It was a bad winter then; the farmers' live-stock all died. My people have been bred up in the district for years, and I know that. The house here was much as it is now, except that there was none of this lighting (only paraffin lamps, poor girl!); and you were obliged to pump up what water you wanted; and people read the newspaper quite through, and discussed it for days.

"The people were a little different to look at, too. I am sure I do not understand why we

think beards are so strange nowadays; they seem to think that men who had beards never had any emotions. But even young men wore them then, and looked handsome enough. There was a newly married couple living in this house at the time; at least, they had been married only the summer before. They were named Edward and Jane Waycross, and it was considered a good match everywhere.

"Edward Waycross did not have a beard, but he had bushy side-whiskers which he kept curled. He was not a handsome man, either, being somewhat dry and hard-favoured; but he was a religious man, and a good man, and an excellent man of business, they say: a manufacturer of agricultural implements at Hawkhurst. He had determined that Jane Anders (as she was) would make him a good wife, and I dare say she did. The girl had several suitors. Although Mr. Waycross was the best match, I know it surprised people a little when she accepted him, because she was thought to have been fond of another man—a more striking man, whom many of the young girls were after. This was Jeremy Wilkes: who came of a very good family, but was considered wicked. He was no younger than Mr. Waycross, but he had a great black beard, and wore white waistcoats with gold chains, and drove a gig. Of course, there had been gossip, but that was because Jane Anders was considered pretty."

Their hostess had been sitting back against the sofa, quietly folding the little white bag with one hand, and speaking in a prim voice. Now she did something which turned her hearers cold.

You have probably seen the same thing done many times. She had been touching her cheek lightly with the fingers of the other hand. In doing so, she touched the flesh at the corner under her lower eyelid, and accidentally drew down the corner of that eyelid—which should have exposed the red part of the inner lid at the corner of the eye. It was not red. It was of a sickly pale colour.

"In the course of his business dealings," she went on, "Mr. Waycross had often to go to London, and usually he was obliged to remain overnight. But Jane Waycross was not afraid to remain alone in the house. She had a good servant, a staunch old woman, and a good dog. Even so, Mr. Waycross commended her for her courage."

The girl smiled. "On the night I wish to tell you of, in February, Mr. Waycross was absent. Unfortunately, too, the old servant was absent; she had been called away as a midwife to attend her cousin, and Jane Waycross had allowed her to go. This was known in the village, since all such affairs are

well known, and some uneasiness was felt—this house being isolated, as you know. But she was not afraid.

"It was a very cold night, with a heavy fall of snow which had stopped about nine o'clock. You must know, beyond doubt, that poor Jane Waycross was alive after it had stopped snowing. It must have been nearly half-past nine when a Mr. Moody—a very good and sober man who lived in Hawkhurst — was driving home along the road past this house. As you know, it stands in the middle of a great bare stretch of lawn; and you can see the house clearly from the road. Mr. Moody saw poor Jane at the window of one of the upstairs bedrooms, with a candle in her hand, closing the shutters. But he was not the only witness who saw her alive.

"On that same evening, Mr. Wilkes (the handsome gentleman I spoke to you of a moment ago) had been at a tavern in the village of Five Ashes with Dr. Sutton, the local doctor, and a racing gentleman named Pawley. At about half-past eleven they started to drive home in Mr. Wilkes' gig to Cross-in-Hand. I am afraid they had been drinking, but they were all in their sober senses. The landlord of the tavern remembered the time because he had stood in the doorway to watch the gig, which had fine yellow wheels, go spanking away as though there were no snow; and Mr. Wilkes in one of the new round hats with a curly brim.

"There was a bright moon. 'And no danger,' Dr. Sutton always said afterwards: 'shadows of trees and fences as clear as though a silhouette-cutter had made 'em for sixpence.' But when they were passing this house Mr. Wilkes pulled up sharp. There was a bright light in the window of one of the downstairs rooms—this room, in fact. They sat out there looking round the hood of the gig, and wondering.

"Mr. Wilkes spoke: 'I don't like this,' he said. 'You know, gentlemen, that Waycross is still in London; and the lady in question is in the habit of retiring early. I am going up there to find out if anything is wrong.'

"With that he jumped out of the gig, his black beard jutting out and his breath smoking. He said: 'And if it is a burglar, then, by Something, gentlemen'—I will not repeat the word he used —'by Something, gentlemen, I'll settle him.' He walked through the gate and up to the house—they could follow every step he made—and looked into the windows of this room here. Presently he returned looking relieved (they could see him by the light of the gig lamps), but wiping the moisture off his forehead.

" 'It's all right,' he said to

them; 'Waycross has come home. But, by Something, gentlemen, he is growing thinner these days, or it is shadows.'

"Then he told them what he had seen. If you look through the front windows—there—you can look sideways and see out through the doorway into the main hall. He said he had seen Mrs. Waycross standing in the hall with her back to the staircase, wearing a blue dressing-wrap over her nightgown, and her hair down round her shoulders. Standing in front of her, with his back to Mr. Wilkes, was a tallish, thin man like Mr. Waycross, with a long greatcoat and a tall hat like Mr. Waycross's. *She* was carrying either a candle or a lamp; and he remembered how the tall hat seemed to wag back and forth, as though the man were talking to her or putting out his hands towards her. For he said he could not see the woman's face.

"Of course, it was not Mr. Waycross; but how were they to know that?

"At about seven o'clock next morning, Mrs. Randall, the old servant, returned. (A fine boy had been born to her cousin the night before.) Mrs. Randall came home through the white dawn and the white snow, and found the house all locked up. She could get no answer to her knocking. Being a woman of great resolution, she eventually broke a window and got in. But, when she saw what was in the front hall, she went out screaming for help.

"Poor Jane was past help. I know I should not speak of these things; but I must. She was lying on her face in the hall. From the waist down her body was much charred and — unclothed, you know, because fire had burnt away most of the nightgown and the dressing-wrap. The tiles of the hall were soaked with blood and paraffin oil, the oil having come from a broken lamp with a thick blue-silk shade which was lying a little distance away. Near it was a china candlestick with a candle. This fire had also charred a part of the panelling of the wall, and a part of the staircase. Fortunately, the floor is of brick tiles, and there had not been much paraffin left in the lamp, or the house would have been set afire.

"But she had not died from burns alone. Her throat had been cut with a deep slash from some very sharp blade. But she had been alive for a while to feel both things, for she had crawled forward on her hands while she was burning. It was a cruel death, a horrible death for a soft person like that."

There was a pause. The expression on the face of the narrator, the plump girl in the brown dress, altered slightly. So did the expression of her eyes. She was sitting beside Muriel; and moved a little closer.

"Of course, the police came. I

do not understand such things, I am afraid, but they found that the house had not been robbed. They also noticed the odd thing I have mentioned, that there was both a lamp *and* a candle in a candlestick near her. The lamp came from Mr. and Mrs. Waycross's bedroom upstairs, and so did the candlestick; there were no other lamps or candles downstairs except the lamps waiting to be filled next morning in the back kitchen. But the police thought she would not have come downstairs carrying both the lamp *and* the candle as well.

"She must have brought the lamp, because that was broken. When the murderer took hold of her, they thought, she had dropped the lamp, and it went out; the paraffin spilled, but did not catch fire. Then this man in the tall hat, to finish his work after he had cut her throat, went upstairs, and got a candle, and set fire to the spilled oil. I am stupid at these things; but even I should have guessed that this must mean someone familiar with the house. Also, if she came downstairs, it must have been to let someone in at the front door; and that could not have been a burglar.

"You may be sure all the gossips were like police from the start, even when the police hemm'd and haw'd, because they knew Mrs. Waycross must have opened the door to a man who was not her husband. And immediately they found an indication of this, in the mess that the fire and blood had made in the hall. Some distance away from poor Jane's body there was a medicine-bottle, such as chemists use. I think it had been broken in two pieces; and on one intact piece they found sticking some fragments of a letter that had not been quite burned. It was in a man's handwriting, not her husband's, and they made out enough of it to understand. It was full of—expressions of love, you know, and it made an appointment to meet her there on that night."

Rodney Hunter, as the girl paused, felt impelled to ask a question.

"Did they know whose handwriting it was?"

"It was Jeremy Wilkes's," replied the other simply. "Though they never proved that, never more than slightly suspected it, and the circumstances did not bear it out. In fact, a knife stained with blood was actually found in Mr. Wilkes's possession. But the police never brought it to anything, poor souls. For, you see, not Mr. Wilkes—nor anyone else in the world — could possibly have done the murder."

"I don't understand that," said Hunter, rather sharply.

"Forgive me if I am stupid about telling things," urged their hostess in a tone of apology. She

seemed to be listening to the chimney growl under a cold sky, and listening with hard, placid eyes. "But even the village gossips could tell that. When Mrs. Randall came here to the house on that morning, both the front and the back doors were locked and securely bolted on the inside. All the windows were locked on the inside. If you will look at the fastenings in this dear place, you will know what that means.

"But bless you, that was the least of it! I told you about the snow. The snowfall had stopped at nine o'clock in the evening, hours before Mrs. Waycross was murdered. When the police came, there were only two separate sets of footprints in the great unmarked half-acre of snow round the house. One set belonged to Mr. Wilkes, who had come up and looked in through the window the night before. The other belonged to Mrs. Randall. The police could follow and explain both sets of tracks; but there were no other tracks at all, and no one was hiding in the house.

"Of course, it was absurd to suspect Mr. Wilkes. It was not only that he told a perfectly straight story about the man in the tall hat; but both Dr. Sutton and Mr. Pawley, who drove back with him from Five Ashes were there to swear he could not have done it. You understand, he came no closer to the house than the windows of this room. They could watch every step he made in the moonlight, and they did. Afterwards he drove home with Dr. Sutton, and slept there, or I should say, they continued their terrible drinking until daylight. It is true that they found in his possession a knife with blood on it, but he explained that he had used the knife to gut a rabbit.

"It was the same with poor Mrs. Randall, who had been up all night about her midwife's duties, though naturally it was even more absurd to think of *her*. But there were no other footprints at all, either coming to or going from the house, in all that stretch of snow; and all the ways in or out were locked on the inside."

It was Muriel who spoke then, in a voice that tried to be crisp, but wavered in spite of her. "Are you telling us that all this is true?" she demanded.

"I am teasing you a little, my dear," said the other. "But, really, and truly, it all did happen. Perhaps I will show you in a moment."

"I suppose it was really the husband who did it?" asked Muriel in a bored tone.

"Poor Mr. Waycross!" said their hostess tenderly. "He spent that night in a temperance hotel near Charing Cross Station, as he always did, and, of course, he never left it. When he learned about his wife's duplicity"—

again Hunter thought she was going to pull down a corner of her eyelid—"it nearly drove him out of his mind, poor fellow. I think he gave up agricultural machinery and took to preaching, but I am not sure. I know he left the district soon afterwards, and before he left he insisted on burning the mattress of their bed. It was a dreadful scandal."

"But in that case," insisted Hunter, "who did kill her? And, if there were no footprints and all the doors were locked, how did the murderer come or go? Finally, if all this happened in February, what does it have to do with people being out of the house on Christmas Eve?"

"Ah, that is the real story. That is what I meant to tell you."

She grew very subdued.

"It must have been very interesting to watch the people alter and grow older, or find queer paths, in the years afterwards. For, of course, nothing did happen as yet. The police presently gave it all up; for decency's sake it was allowed to rest. There was a new pump built in the market square; and the news of the Prince of Wales's going to India in '75 to talk about; and presently a new family came to live at 'Clearlawns,' and began to raise their children. The trees and the rains in summer were just the same, you know. It must have been seven or eight years before anything happened, for Jane Waycross was very patient.

"Several of the people had died in the meantime. Mrs. Randall had, in a fit of quinsy; and so had Dr. Sutton, but that was a great mercy, because he fell by the way when he was going out to perform an amputation with too much of the drink in him. But Mr. Pawley had prospered—and, above all, so had Mr. Wilkes. He had become an even finer figure of a man, they tell me, as he drew near middle age. When he married he gave up all his loose habits. Yes, he married; it was the Tinsley heiress, Miss Linshaw, whom he had been courting at the time of the murder; and I have heard that poor Jane Waycross, even after she was married to Mr. Waycross, used to bite her pillow at night because she was so horribly jealous of Miss Linshaw.

"Mr. Wilkes had always been tall, and now he was finely stout. He always wore frock-coats. Though he had lost most of his hair, his beard was full and curly; he had twinkling black eyes, and twinkling ruddy cheeks, and a bluff voice. All the children ran to him. They say he broke as many feminine hearts as before. At any wholesome entertainment he was always first to lead the cotillion or applaud the fiddler, and I do not know what hostesses would have done without him.

"On Christmas Eve, then—re-

member, I am not sure of the date—the Fentons gave a Christmas party. The Fentons were the very nice family who had taken this house afterwards, you know. There was to be no dancing, but all the old games. Naturally, Mr. Wilkes was the first of all to be invited, and the first to accept; for everything was all smoothed away by time, like the wrinkles in last year's counterpane; and what's past *is* past, or so they say. They had decorated the house with holly and mistletoe, and guests began to arrive as early as two in the afternoon.

"I had all this from Mrs. Fenton's aunt (one of the Warwickshire Abbotts), who was actually staying here at the time. In spite of such a festal season, the preparations had not been going at all well that day, though such preparations usually did. Miss Abbott complained that there was a nasty earthy smell in the house. It was a dark and raw day, and the chimneys did not seem to draw as well as they should. What is more, Mrs. Fenton cut her finger when she was carving the cold fowl, because she said one of the children had been hiding behind the window-curtains in here, and peeping out at her; she was very angry. But Mr. Fenton, who was going about the house in his carpet slippers before the arrival of the guests, called her 'Mother' and said that it was Christmas.

"It is certainly true that they forgot all about this when the fun of the games began. Such squealings you never heard!—or so I am told. Foremost of all at Bobbing for Apples or Nuts in May was Mr. Jeremy Wilkes. He stood, gravely paternal, in the midst of everything, with his ugly wife beside him, and stroked his beard. He saluted each of the ladies on the cheek under the mistletoe; there was also some scampering to salute him; and, though he *did* remain for longer than was necessary behind the window-curtains with the younger Miss Twigelow, his wife only smiled. There was only one unpleasant incident, soon forgotten. Towards dusk a great gusty wind began to come up, with the chimneys smoking worse than usual. It being nearly dark, Mr. Fenton said it was time to fetch in the Snapdragon Bowl, and watch it flame. You know the game? It is a great bowl of lighted spirit, and you must thrust in your hand and pluck out a raisin from the bottom without scorching your fingers. Mr. Fenton carried it in on a tray in the half-darkness; it was flickering with that bluish flame you have seen on Christmas puddings. Miss Abbott said that once, in carrying it, he started and turned round. She said that for a second she thought there was a face looking over her shoulder, and it wasn't a nice face.

"Later in the evening, when

the children were sleepy and there was tissue-paper scattered all over the house, the grown-ups began their game in earnest. Someone suggested Blind Man's Bluff. They were mostly using the hall and this room here, as having more space than the dining-room. Various members of the party were blindfolded with the men's handkerchiefs; but there was a dreadful amount of cheating. Mr. Fenton grew quite annoyed about it, because the ladies almost always caught Mr. Wilkes when they could; Mr. Wilkes was laughing and perspiring heartily, and his great cravat with the silver pin had almost come loose.

"To make it certain nobody could cheat, Mr. Fenton got a little white linen bag—like this one. It was the pillow-cover off the baby's cot, really; and he said nobody could look through that if it were tied over the head.

"I should explain that they had been having some trouble with the lamp in this room. Mr. Fenton said: 'Confound it, mother, what is wrong with that lamp? Turn up the wick, will you?' It was really quite a good lamp from Spence and Minstead's, and should not have burned so dull as it did. In the confusion, while Mrs. Fenton was trying to make the light better, and he was looking over his shoulder at her, Mr. Fenton had been rather absently fastening the bag on the head of the last person caught. He had said since that he did not notice who it was. No one else noticed, either, the light being so dim and there being such a large number of people. It seemed to be a girl in a broad bluish kind of dress, standing over near the door.

"Perhaps you know how people act when they have just been blindfolded in this game. First they usually stand very still, as though they were smelling or sensing in which direction to go. Sometimes they make a sudden jump, or sometimes they begin to shuffle gently forward. Everyone noticed what an air of *purpose* there seemed to be about this person whose face was covered; and she went forward very slowly, and seemed to crouch down a bit.

"It began to move towards Mr. Wilkes in very short but quick little jerks, the white bag bobbing on its face. At this time Mr. Wilkes was sitting at the end of the table, laughing, with his face pink above the beard, and a glass of our Kentish cider in his hand. I want you to imagine this room as being very dim, and much more cluttered, what with all the tassels they had on the furniture then; and the high-piled hair of the ladies, too. The hooded person got to the edge of the table. It began to edge along towards Mr. Wilkes's chair; and then it jumped.

"Mr. Wilkes got up and skip-

ped (yes, skipped) out of its way, laughing. It waited quietly, after which it went, in the same slow way, towards him again. It nearly got him again, by the edge of the potted plant. All this time it did not say anything, you understand, although everyone was applauding it and crying encouraging advice. It kept its head down. Miss Abbott says she began to notice an unpleasant faint smell of burnt cloth or something worse, which turned her half-ill. By the time the hooded person came stooping clear across the room, as certainly as though it could see him, Mr. Wilkes was not laughing any longer.

"In the corner by one bookcase, he said out loud: 'I'm tired of this silly, rotten game; go away, do you hear?' Nobody there had ever heard him speak like that, in such a loud, wild way, but they laughed and thought it must be the Kentish cider. 'Go away!' cried Mr. Wilkes again, and began to strike at it with his fist. All this time, Miss Abbott says, she had observed his face gradually changing.

"He dodged again, very pleasant and nimble for such a big man, but with the perspiration running down his face. Back across the room he went again, with it following him; and he cried out something that most naturally shocked them all inexpressibly.

"He screamed out: 'For God's sake, Fenton, take it off me!'

"And for the last time the thing jumped.

"They were over near the curtains of that bay window, which were drawn as they are now. Miss Twigelow, who was nearest, says that Mr. Wilkes could not have seen anything, because the white bag was still drawn over the woman's head. The only thing she noticed was that at the lower part of the bag, where the face must have been, there was a curious kind of discoloration, a stain of some sort which had not been there before; something seemed to be seeping through. Mr. Wilkes fell back between the curtains, with the hooded person after him, and screamed again. There was a kind of thrashing noise in or behind the curtains; then they fell straight again, and everything grew quiet.

"Now, our Kentish cider is very strong, and for a moment Mr. Fenton did not know what to think. He tried to laugh at it, but the laugh did not sound well. Then he went over to the curtains, calling out gruffly to them to come out of there and not play the fool. But, after he had looked inside the curtains, he turned round very sharply and asked the rector to get the ladies out of the room. This was done, but Miss Abbott often said that she had one quick peep inside. Though the bay windows were locked on

the inside, Mr. Wilkes was now alone on the window seat. She could see his beard sticking up, and the blood. He was dead, of course. But, since he had murdered Jane Waycross, I sincerely think that he deserved to die."

For several seconds the two listeners did not move. She had all too successfully conjured up this room in the late 'seventies, whose stuffiness still seemed to pervade it now.

"But look here!" protested Hunter, when he could fight down an inclination to get out of the room quickly. "You say he killed her after all? And yet you told us he had an absolute alibi. You said he never went closer to the house than the windows. . . ."

"No more he did, my dear," said the other.

"He was courting the Linshaw heiress at the time," she resumed; "and Miss Linshaw was a very proper young lady who would have been horrified if she had heard about him and Jane Waycross. She would have broken off the match, naturally. But poor Jane Waycross meant her to hear. She was much in love with Mr. Wilkes, and she was going to tell the whole matter publicly: Mr. Wilkes had been trying to persuade her not to do so."

"But—"

"Oh, don't you see what happened?" cried the other in a pettish tone. "It is so dreadfully simple. I am not clever at these things, but I should have seen it in a moment; even if I did not already know. I told you everything so that you should be able to guess."

"When Mr. Wilkes and Dr. Sutton and Mr. Pawley drove past here in the gig that night, they saw a bright light burning in the windows of this room. I told you that. But the police never wondered, as anyone should, what caused that light. Jane Waycross never came into this room, as you know; she was out in the hall, carrying either a lamp or candle. But that lamp in the thick blue-silk shade, held out there in the hall, would not have caused a bright light to shine through this room and illuminate it. Neither would a tiny candle; it is absurd. And I told you there were no other lamps in the house except some empty ones waiting to be filled in the back kitchen. There is only one thing they could have seen. They saw the great blaze of the paraffin oil round Jane Waycross's body.

"Didn't I tell you it was dreadfully simple? Poor Jane was upstairs waiting for her lover. From the upstairs window she saw Mr. Wilkes's gig drive along the road in the moonlight, and she did not know there were other men in it; she thought he was alone. She came downstairs—

"It is an awful thing that the police did not think more about

that broken medicine-bottle lying in the hall, the large bottle that was broken in just two long pieces. She must have had a use for it; and, of course, she had. You knew that the oil in the lamp was almost exhausted, although there was a great blaze round the body. When poor Jane came downstairs, she was carrying the unlighted lamp in one hand; in the other hand she was carrying a lighted candle, and an old medicine bottle containing paraffin oil. When she got downstairs, she meant to fill the lamp from the medicine-bottle, and then light it with the candle.

"But she was too eager to get downstairs, I am afraid. When she was more than half-way down, hurrying, that long nightgown tripped her. She pitched forward down the stairs on her face. The medicine-bottle broke on the tiles under her, and poured a lake of paraffin round her body. Of course, the lighted candle set the paraffin blazing when it fell; but that was not all. One intact side of that broken bottle, long and sharp and cleaner than any blade, cut into her throat when she fell on the smashed bottle. She was not quite stunned by the fall. When she felt herself burning, and the blood almost as hot, she tried to save herself. She tried to crawl forward on her hands, forward into the hall, away from the blood and oil and fire.

"That was what Mr. Wilkes really saw when he looked in through the window.

"You see, he had been unable to get rid of the two fuddled friends, who insisted on clinging to him and drinking with him. He had been obliged to drive them home. If he could not go to 'Clearlawns' now, he wondered how at least he could leave a message; and the light in the window gave him an excuse.

"He saw pretty Jane propped up on her hands in the hall, looking out at him beseechingly while the blue flame ran up and turned yellow. You might have thought he would have pitied, for she loved him very much. Her wound was not really a deep wound. If he had broken into the house at that moment, he might have saved her life. But he preferred to let her die; because now she would make no public scandal and spoil his chances with the rich Miss Linshaw. That was why he returned to his friends and told a lie about a murderer in a tall hat. It is why, in heaven's truth, he murdered her himself. But when he returned to his friends, I do not wonder that they saw him mopping his forehead. You know how Jane Waycross came back for him presently."

There was another heavy silence.

The girl got to her feet, with a sort of bouncing motion which

was as suggestive as it was vaguely familiar. It was as though she were about to run. She stood there, a trifle crouched, in her prim brown dress, so oddly narrow at the waist after an old-fashioned pattern; and in the play of light on her face Rodney Hunter fancied that its prettiness was only a shell.

"The same thing happened afterwards, on some Christmas Eves," she explained. "They played Blind Man's Bluff over again. That is why people who live here do not care to risk it nowadays. It happens at a quarter-past seven—"

Hunter stared at the curtains. "But it was a quarter-past seven when we got here!" he said. "It must now be—"

"Oh, yes," said the girl, and her eyes brimmed over. "You see, I told you you had nothing to fear; it was all over then. But that is not why I thank you. I begged you to stay, and you did. You have listened to me, as no one else would. And now I have told it at last, and now I think both of us can sleep."

Not a fold stirred or altered in the dark curtains that closed the window bay; yet, as though a blurred lens had come into focus, they now seemed innocent and devoid of harm. You could have put a Christmas-tree there. Rodney Hunter, with Muriel following his gaze, walked across and threw back the curtains. He saw a quiet window-seat covered with chintz, and the rising moon beyond the window. When he turned round, the girl in the old-fashioned dress was not there. But the front doors were open again, for he could feel a current of air blowing through the house.

With his arm round Muriel, who was white-faced, he went out into the hall. They did not look long at the scorched and beaded stains at the foot of the panelling, for even the scars of fire seemed gentle now. Instead, they stood in the doorway looking out, while the house threw its great blaze of light across the frosty Weald. It was a welcoming light. Over the rise of a hill, black dots trudging in the frost showed that Jack Bannister's party was returning; and they could hear the sound of voices carrying far. They heard one of the party carelessly singing a Christmas carol for glory and joy, and the laughter of children coming home.

the last shot

by . . . Frank O'Rourke

Revenge was sweet, but it had to be measured exactly to suit John Brandon's curious taste.

JOHN BRANDON stopped that night in a stand of pines on the last, long slope above the Shovel valley, eating two sandwiches and drinking cold, flat coffee from his canteen. Darkness had settled when he spread one blanket under the pines and lay back, with the soft, grass-sweetened wind stirring the treetops above him, shaking the first dead leaves over his bed. His horse cropped grass with tired dignity about the perimeter of its stake rope. John Brandon thought of his younger brother and replaced this sad memory with the face of another man—the man he hoped to find in the town up this valley; and then, forcing body and mind into rest, he slept deeply through the early fall night.

He rode late the next morning, picking up a dusty wagon trail that brought him into the town of Bend during the noon hour. He stabled and cared for his horse in the livery barn on the north end of Bend's single business block, and followed the stableman into the dingy, unswept office. The stableman—an old,

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Frank O'Rourke is the author of THE BRAVADOS *(1957, Dell), the book on which the later 20th Century-Fox motion picture, starring Gregory Peck and Joan Collins, was based. He is also the author of some thirty other novels, including* THE DIAMOND HITCH, DAKOTA RIFLE, *and* THE BIG FIFTY.

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weathered man with the bright, inquisitive eyes of the small-town gossip spreader—carried a floating aroma of nitrogen and stale barn smells in his clothing. Brandon had to start somewhere and the stableman was nearest at hand. Brandon sat in the bigger of two wire-tied kitchen chairs and started to roll a cigarette.

"Quiet little town," Brandon said.

"She is and she ain't."

Brandon said, "Been here long?"

"Ten years this winter."

Brandon said, "Then you know everybody, I reckon?"

"All the living and most of the dead," the stableman said. "You looking for somebody?"

"Why, yes," Brandon said mildly. "A pretty big fellow with curly black hair and a mustache. Nice-looking and wears good clothes with fine boots. Does that place him for you?"

"Sure," the stableman said. "That's Charley Cannady. Been here about six months, buying and selling stock and some land. A real nice fellow, Charley." The stableman stared innocently at Brandon. "Got business with him?"

"Yes," Brandon said.

The stableman frowned. "Hope Charley ain't in no trouble?"

"No trouble," Brandon said. "Where does he hang out?"

"Up to the hotel."

"Thanks," Brandon said. "You care if I sit around awhile? My legs are tired."

"Make yourself to home," the stableman said. "I got to see a fella. Anybody comes in, tell 'em I'll be right back."

"Take your time," Brandon told him. "I'll hold the place down until you get back."

He saw the avid curiosity rising in the stableman's eyes, that small lurking fear of any stranger riding into town and inquiring about a citizen in good standing; and with this fear lay the hope that something might happen to relieve the monotony. Brandon watched him step outside and walk from view. Alone in the musty office with horses moving lazily against stall boards behind the thin office wall, Brandon thought of the ten months he had spent in trailing one man, the work and time and grief compressed into those months. And now his man was no more than one block distant. Now he could take his time.

He heard boots on the board sidewalk; and then a man middle-aged and plump filled the street door of the office with his short, wide bulk. His eyes found Brandon and stared without interest as he said, "Howdy."

"Stableman's out," Brandon said. "Be back soon."

"I'm Meagher," the man said. "Town marshal."

Brandon saw the star then,

half concealed by an open, sagging vest, and knew where the stableman had gone—directly to the marshal's office with information. Brandon wondered incuriously how many times this same tableau had been repeated in past years. He said quietly, "My name is Brandon, Marshal. What's the trouble?"

"No trouble, Mr. Brandon."

"He told you fast enough," Brandon said.

Meagher reddened faintly and stepped into the office. He said, "What's your business with Cannady?"

"My own," Brandon said. "But seeing you're the law, I'll make it plain. I plan on shooting him."

Meagher did not show surprise. He said, "Why?"

"He shot my brother," Brandon said. "I've been trailing him quite a spell."

"How long?"

"Ten months," Brandon said. "Maybe you figure I'm foolish to tell you, Marshal. Here's my papers from down home. I'm deputized legally and got a warrant to bring him back. You can wire the sheriff there if you want proof."

Meagher examined the faded, sharply creased papers and returned them. He said, "You want him legal, I take it."

"You read the warrant," Brandon said.

"Dead or alive?"

Brandon said, "You read the warrant."

Meagher breathed gustily and took another step into the office. "You got a warrant, but you don't figure on taking him back, do you? You want to shoot him right here?"

"I described my man," Brandon said gently. "Your errand boy verified it, and now you agree. He's here. I'll be seeing him."

"All right," Meagher said. "He's been here six months and doing fine. Getting married next week, matter of fact."

"Home-town girl?"

"Yes. He built a new house. All furnished and ready to live in. This will hurt the girl. She's a good girl."

"Better now than later," Brandon said. "Will you tell him I'm in town?"

"Can't we do this legal?" Meagher asked heavily. "Take him back to stand trial. If that was the only thing he done wrong, it might not be too late for him to square the debt."

"I didn't need to ride in and tell you," Brandon said. "I could get him on my own, you know. I just want to make it clear. My brother had no gun that night. Understand?"

"No gun? But—"

"I know," Brandon said tonelessly. "You know this Cannady. He's good with a gun. No use arguing, Marshal."

"You won't change your mind?"

"No," Brandon said. "And I'll warn him. At six tonight, clear your street and send him out. I'll be here. I'll meet him."

Meagher glanced at the gun on Brandon's right leg. "You any good with that?"

"You been studying it ten minutes," Brandon said bluntly. "You knew before you asked. No, I'm no good with it."

"Then why—"

"I want it that way," Brandon said. "I'm giving him a fair chance, more than he gave my brother. He can't back down and save face. You want to tell him or do I?"

Meagher was completely serious now. "That's your job. I reckon I ought to stop you, but it wouldn't do no good. You'd just keep on till you got him."

"A good guess," Brandon said.

Meagher nodded and moved through the door, pausing on the sidewalk to look once more at Brandon's gun and shake his head with heavy bewilderment. Brandon waited in the office until the marshal's steps had died away to the south. They were replaced minutes later by the stableman's light, tapping feet; then Brandon stood quickly and faced the stableman in the door.

"That was fast work," Brandon said, "but let me tell you something. Just stay around here this afternoon, and stay away from my horse. I'll be back directly."

Brandon passed the suddenly frightened man and walked south along Bend's short business block. The marshal's office and the jail were on the same side of the street and fifty feet or so south of the livery barn; and standing in a weather-worn rectangular shape on the opposite corner, three stories high and needing paint, was the hotel. Brandon crossed over and entered the lobby, hearing the clatter of dishes and talking voices from the adjoining dining room. Brandon took a faded, dried-out leather chair against the north wall and sat quietly until these sounds had nearly died away. The clerk watched him incuriously from behind a small desk.

Brandon said, "Mr. Cannady in there?"

"I think so," the clerk said. "You want to see him?"

"Please," Brandon said mildly.

"I'll tell him," the clerk said. "He's almost done with dinner."

The clerk went into the dining room and returned immediately, saying, "He'll be right out." Brandon rose from the chair and moved closer to the connecting door, hearing boots scrape and chairs pushed back as the unseen men rose from their table and spoke together for a brief moment. One man left the dining room by the street door and another paused to exchange a pleas-

antry with the waitress and then entered the lobby. Brandon recognized his man.

"Cannady," he said.

Cannady smiled and extended one hand. "You wish to see me, sir?"

"Yes," Brandon said. "Don't you know me?"

Cannady frowned. "Can't seem to place you."

"My name is Brandon," Brandon said. "Does that help?"

Cannady was not wearing his gun at this noon hour, but one hand made an automatic, involuntary gesture toward his right leg. He stood alert and stiffly, understanding and remembrance masked behind sharp black eyes.

"Brandon?" he said then. "I don't know any Brandons, sir. There must be some mistake."

"Talk is a waste of time," Brandon said. "I'll be at the livery barn this afternoon. At six I'll step into the street. I expect you to do likewise from this hotel. Stop thinking about making a break. I've trailed you ten months. Run for it and you'll get no even chance next time."

"Look here—" Cannady said.

"You hear me," Brandon said stolidly. "Make a break and I'll use a rifle on you in the hills."

Cannady remembered him well enough, even though their meeting in the past had been a quick passage on the main street of Brandon's home town. It was through the close resemblance of Brandon to his younger brother that Cannady saw and compared and remembered. Brandon watched him search rapidly into the past and recall certain facts about the Brandons. As the marshal before him had done, Cannady glanced at the gun on Brandon's leg and noted that it was unpolished by use and riding much too high on Brandon's leg for a swift, accurate draw. Cannady was remembering that the Brandons were peaceable men who no longer used guns in settling their quarrels; and, knowing this, he lost all fear.

Brandon said again: "You hear me?"

"Certainly," Cannady said. "I will accommodate you at six with pleasure. I suppose it would do no good to repeat that your foolish brother pushed me into that fight?"

"I know how it happened," Brandon said. "Save your words. I'll see you at six."

"I'll explain to our marshal," Cannady said. "I don't want interference."

"No need," Brandon said. "I saw him."

Brandon was inwardly pleased to see the sudden fear on Cannady's face at mention of the marshal. No matter what it was, the hunt was finished. Brandon turned and walked from the hotel and north on the quiet street to the office of the livery barn. The stableman came from the alley-

way, shaking straw from his thin shoulders, and pottered uncomfortably behind the desk.

"Swallow the talk," Brandon said curtly. "You wouldn't be having any more business around town, would you?"

"I reckon not," the man said.

"Then do your work," Brandon said, "and keep your mouth shut."

A man needed to go back, Brandon thought, and consider everything carefully before he went forth to finish anything. He had trailed Cannady for ten months with the memory of his younger brother clear in his mind; but now, in the last minutes before the end of the trail, it was only fair and wise to remember everything and make sure he was right. Brandon sat in the dirty office through the long afternoon, watching the town move sluggishly, thinking of his own home and the past.

South of here was another country in a sense, settled and done with the first wild rush of the bad ones such as Cannady. Brandon had almost forgotten how to draw his gun in the past five years except to use it to hammer staples and twist wire and shoot an occasional crippled animal. His own town had settled comfortably into the middle portion of any town's history, growing steadily with the addition of schools and churches and good people. Brandon had grown through the wild years, but his younger brother had come along too late for a real taste of this feeling, and the result showed up in him as it did in all the younger men on the range. Boys will be boys, the old-timers chuckled, watching the younger men ride fast and whoop it up on Saturday nights, taking their excess meanness out in fist fights that left them slightly battered but thoroughly cleansed of that wildness. A few men like Cannady still happened through the towns, though, and it was inevitable for the younger men to appraise them with a feeling of wonder and envy. Brandon's younger brother had been foolish to a certain degree, but he had never considered serious harm to any man.

Brandon had been hazing strays from the river bottom that week and had not ridden into town on Saturday night. His younger brother and the two hands left in late afternoon, after begging him half-heartedly to come along. They rode away in high spirits, dressed in their best, racing to a big night. Brandon watched them go and chuckled with the knowledge and stability of his thirty-five years. He knew the pattern of their night before they made the first move: riding fast down the main street, yelling in sheer good humor, a couple of drinks at the Longhorn, and then the dance. And about five the

next morning they would ride into Brandon's river camp with a great deal of unnecessary hullaballoo, waking him and retelling all the fights and flirtations and other gossip of the neighborhood. Brandon's younger brother was interested in a town girl and would moon around for a day, thinking about her. Brandon knew the girl was an empty-headed little fool, but it was useless to give warning. His brother would discover it for himself in due time.

Five old friends rode into the river camp just after three o'clock, and they woke him without shouts or laughter. He sat up in his blankets and stared above the hastily kindled fire and missed his brother's face. They told him what had happened while he slipped into his boots and saddled his horse for the ride to town. His brother had been shot by a stranger named Charles Chambers. Brandon had seen Chambers in town a week ago, in the Longhorn, but had not spoken to the man. It seemed that Chambers had kept company with young Brandon's girl for several evenings prior to the Saturday night dance. Brandon's younger brother exchanged hot words with Chambers on the dance floor, and Chambers said, "Shut up, kid. Grow up and then come around." That was more than enough for a hotheaded fool, even though Chambers wore a gun and knew how to use it. Chambers escorted the girl to her home at midnight and Brandon's younger brother followed. His friends tagged along to watch the expected fist fight. Chambers was in the kitchen with the girl, his horse tied out back, his equipment ready for a long ride. Brandon's younger brother knocked on the kitchen door and shouted at Chambers to come out and fight like a man. Chambers told him to go away, and Brandon's younger brother answered that he was coming in. He was not wearing a gun. When he slammed the door open and stood in the doorway, Chambers lifted a shotgun from beside his kitchen chair and shot him. By the time the other young men reached the house, the girl was screaming and Chambers had gone.

Brandon rode thirty miles to town without speaking. He stayed with his brother until the inevitable happened and then did the only thing a man could do. He knew his younger brother had been foolish and rash, but he had not carried a gun and Chambers knew this. The county sheriff deputized Brandon and wrote out the warrant. Brandon went home and made arrangements for the future. His older brother and two uncles would take care of the ranch work, and the neighbors would help. Brandon started on the trail that night. He had ridden ever since, following the cold

trace, the little clues, the gradually warming scent of his man. He had given himself a year; now two months were on the credit side of the ledger.

He had lost weight during this time. He had been a tall and somewhat bulky man, but he had sloughed off his excess weight until he was pared down to muscle and bone—a sober-faced man with a three-day growth of black whiskers partially hiding his square jaw and weather-darkened face. He wore the same heavy leather chaps he had started with, buckled above the knee and frayed from endless days of riding over all kinds of country. Those chaps in this higher grassland were out of place, but sitting quietly in the sun-heated, smelly office, Brandon made no move to remove them and give his legs the additional freedom needed at six o'clock.

People had gone about their daily business during the afternoon, talking on the street, going and coming, moving unhurriedly through the town. A few wagons rattled in from the west and south, and saddle horses lined the rail before the saloon adjoining the hotel. People were pretty much the same anywhere a man rode, he thought, living out their days in the same jobs and pleasures. This town of Bend was no different from his own town so far away; it would grow more in the next few years and add churches and schools and bigger houses. The marshal would put his gun away and walk the streets without fear of men like Cannady who changed their names to suit their purpose. That would be the best time for the town and its people, he thought, and for all towns and all people.

The marshal did not appear during the afternoon. Cannady came from the hotel at four o'clock and drove past the livery barn in a light buggy, turning north on the last side street toward an unseen house. He returned in an hour and entered the hotel. The stableman pottered around the barn, doing nothing and listening closely. After five o'clock, people began drifting downtown and gathering in the saloons and stores. They had got the news on the invisible grapevine and were waiting for the show. He would not disappoint them, Brandon thought grimly, but might surprise them.

Time was short now. He had reviewed everything and could not see a better way to end the hunt. He had been right from the beginning; his heart, beating steadily without excitement, told him that. He rolled a last cigarette and smoked it deliberately, watching the sun fall lower in the far west.

At exactly ten minutes of six, Brandon walked into the barn alley and said, "Go into your

office and stay there." He waited until the stableman scuttled past him and ducked through the inner door. Then he went to his stall and patted his horse gently, murmuring, "Easy, boy, easy."

The horse nuzzled his shoulder while Brandon saddled and checked all gear twice. He led the horse into the alley, facing the rear door, and tied the reins in a loose slip-knot to the last brace post beside the door. He was standing in deep shadow when he pulled the stubby, double-barreled shotgun from its saddle holster. He inspected two shells and went on to a detailed and careful examination of the shotgun, snapping both triggers and checking the firing pins before loading both barrels and closing the breech. He cocked both triggers, grasped the shotgun by its carved pistol grip, and placed the stock under his arm, against his body, the butt pushed into his armpit, the forearm and barrels pressed firmly against his left leg. The sweat-stiffened wings of his leather chaps and his loose shirt sleeve hid the shotgun from front view. He had practiced this many times and knew exactly how to hold the shotgun. He did not check his revolver in the awkward holster tied against his right leg.

Brandon walked slowly to the barn door facing the street and paused, looking north and south. He saw the stableman's expectant face framed in the office's one dirty window, jerking back quickly as Brandon looked his way. Brandon walked into the street, to the exact center, and faced south; and at this moment Cannady stepped briskly from the hotel veranda and faced north in the center of the street. Brandon estimated the intervening distance at about one hundred steps. The street was empty, but people stood behind every window and door, and one kill-hungry man was straddling the saloon roof.

Brandon walked twenty steps down the street and stopped just before he came abreast of the marshal's office. Meagher stood in his doorway, hands on hips, staring moodily at Brandon. He called in a gentle voice: "You won't reconsider, Brandon?"

"Sorry," Brandon said. "Stay where you are."

Brandon waited in this spot and saw Cannady laugh and move forward quickly, right arm hanging in a fixed arc at his side. In this moment, Brandon saw a girl come from the hotel and stand on the veranda. She was a slender and delicately-featured woman with dark hair, and she lifted one hand to her mouth and leaned stiffly against the weathered, knife-whittled railing in a position of fear. Brandon saw her, knew who she was immediately, and thought of the girl in his home town and of other girls who must be living in other towns, remembering Cannady

and nursing the thinly healed scars of old, bitter memory. He could see them as they lived, forgotten by Cannady; but, watching this woman, he understood why Cannady had stayed on in Bend. She was the woman Cannady had searched for; and, having discovered something as good and decent as she was, he had pushed his old life behind and began a new one. But too late.

Brandon stood without arm movement, watching the distance between them decrease to sixty, fifty, nearly thirty paces. Then Cannady stopped, his face clear and bright in the first soft evening shadow. "Make your play, Brandon," he called sharply.

"Come on," Brandon said. "Come on."

"An old trick," Cannady said. "I've come my half. Your turn now, Brandon. But I'll tell you something. Take five steps and stop. Then go for your gun."

"All right," Brandon said. "I'll call that bluff. I knew you were a coward before. Now I'm sure. I'm wondering which step you'll draw on to catch me off balance. You wouldn't be thinking of that, would you?"

Brandon did not wait for words. He walked forward stiffly and, reaching his third step, tensed his left arm as his leg lifted and moved forward into the fourth step. He stopped suddenly and dropped into a crouch and swung the shotgun up from behind the leather chap, level with his hips, right arm coming across and steadying the barrels. He pulled both triggers at the apex of this swift movement, just before Cannady made his draw. Through the heavy, simultaneous reports, the smoke, and the recoil, Brandon saw the buckshot sweep Cannady from his feet and smash him face down in the street's brown dust. The half-drawn gun spun from lax fingers as Cannady screamed. Behind Brandon, the marshal called hoarsely and came in a heavy, angry rush, shouting: "I knew you had something figured, you—!"

Brandon reloaded the shotgun as he turned to face the marshal. He said coldly, "He won't die. I shot him in the legs."

People were running into the street. The town doctor came through this thickening crowd with his black bag and dropped on both knees beside Cannady. The marshal spoke with a raging fury: "A damned shotgun. Look at his legs. He'll never walk again. You know what buckshot does close up. He'll lose both of 'em. Brandon, you're under arrest. Drop that gun."

Brandon lifted the shotgun and stopped Meagher's hand midway in its flight to the holster. Brandon said, "Listen to me, Meagher. He shot my brother in the legs with a shotgun. My brother had no gun. My brother's alive, sure, with, one leg. You

can check on that, Meagher. I told you I would shoot him. I didn't say kill him. I didn't say what with. This is how I've wanted it for ten months; this is the way it had to be. He's no good, Meagher. He's a coward and a killer, and I want him like this for the rest of his life, and I hope he lives a hundred years."

"I—" Meagher said, and turned away, head low on his chest. "I believe you, Brandon. Everything else checked like you told me."

"I'm riding," Brandon said. "You figure on stopping me?"

"No," Meagher said. "Not now."

Brandon lowered the shotgun and stepped beside the doctor and the man, groaning now in the street's thick dust. Brandon said, "Will he live?"

The doctor did not look up. He said, "Of course he'll live, without the right leg, maybe part of the left. Get a stretcher, you fools. I've got to move this man."

Brandon stepped back and watched them carry Cannady into the hotel. Only then did he turn and say, "Walk along to the barn with me, Meagher."

They pushed through an angry crowd of uncertain, babbling people, into the darkness of the barn alley. Brandon pushed the shotgun into its saddle holster and untied his horse. He said then, "Thanks for understanding, Meagher."

"I got to," Meagher said. "I got to thank you, too. I knew what he was when he came up the street. I've seen a lot of them in my time, Brandon. When they get ready to draw, they show a lot in their eyes."

"*Gracias,*" Brandon said softly.

He mounted and leaned forward in the saddle, a last thought stirring and bothering his mind. He said, "That girl he was marrying tomorrow. I hope you give her the straight of it."

"I will," Meagher said. "That's why I'm thanking you."

"You know her?" Brandon asked.

"My daughter," Meagher said. "You better ride, Brandon. He had a few friends in town. I got to get home."

Brandon began words and shut them off deep in his throat. He rode from the back door of the livery barn, east from the town into open range, then south toward the distant rising ridges. Two hours later, stopping beside a small creek to blow his horse and listen, he drew the shotgun from his saddle holster and dropped it into the creek before riding on.

adventure of the mosaic cylinders

by . . . August Derleth

What was the secret shared by the murderer with this man he had killed? What did they have in common?

"No, Parker," Solar Pons broke in suddenly, "while circumstances cannot lie, they are only too prone to misinterpretation."

"In this case," I began, lowering the *News of the World*, and paused. "But how the devil did you know what I was thinking?"

"That expression of smug satisfaction on your face could only have taken rise from a profound belief that the police are on the right track in their suspicion of Mr. Cecil Bowne's ward in Bowne's murder, an account of which you are manifestly reading."

"How elementary!" I cried. "Angus Birrell was the only one on the scene. The night of the murder was the servants' night off, which Birrell would know, certainly. Moreover, Birrell was Bowne's sole heir."

"Is that not a little too pat?" asked Pons with that annoyingly supercilious air he could so easily assume.

"And his story about running downstairs when he heard Bowne struck down is thin, very thin," I went on.

Solar Pons, that "clever impersonator, with a twinkle in his eye," to quote Vincent Starrett, first appeared in print in 1929. Pons was created, as Anthony Boucher has said, to fill "the abhorrent vacuum in the life of London that followed Sherlock Holmes' decision to, at long last, retire."

"I've read the newspaper accounts. Nothing is so blinding as the obvious! I submit that if Birrell had wanted to murder his benefactor, he could hardly have done so in a manner calculated to cast more suspicion upon himself."

"He's described as a hot-tempered brute of a man," I began again.

"Dear me! How we do embroider what we read! I do not recall that anyone called him a 'brute.' "

"Very well. I retract it."

Pons smiled. "If there has been any evidence of disagreement between the men—or any immediate altercation—it has escaped me," he went on. "And the newspapers have an annoying habit of painting persons and places in accordance with their private prejudices. But it is idle to speculate about the matter when we shall shortly hear from Mr. Birrell himself."

"You're going to Birdlip?" I asked, astonished.

"At the moment, no." Pons drew a crumpled paper from the pocket of his purple dressing-gown and dropped it into the coal-scuttle as he crossed to the mantel for the abominable shag he used to fill his pipe. "I've had a wire from Detective-Sergeant Howard Burnham of Birdlip. He and Birrell are on their way to Number Seven. I expect them at any moment."

Pons had just begun to fill the room with the pungent odor of his pipe when the outer bell rang.

"Ah, I fancy that will be our visitors," said Pons.

In a few moments, Mrs. Johnson knocked at the door to our quarters and, at Pons' invitation, showed our callers in. Detective-Sergeant Burnham was a rotund man of fifty or a little more, clean-shaven, with cherubic cheeks and merry eyes and a generally florid complexion. Angus Birrell, however, was a dark-haired, dark-browed young man to whom a frown seemed to come naturally. He had almost black eyes, which smouldered with ill-concealed anger, it seemed to me, and a mouth that could only be described as petulant. He was athletically built, broad of shoulder, with powerful arms.

Detective-Sergeant Burnham performed the introductions, adding, "Mr. Birrell here insisted on coming, Mr. Pons, and I'll admit I was glad to take the opportunity, as you might say, sir. I don't know what to make of it—murder's not what you'd call common at Birdlip."

"Is murder ever common, Sergeant? Pray be seated, gentlemen." Pons turned to our client. "Harrovian, I see," he said, eyeing the colors woven into Birrell's cravat.

"Yes, Mr. Pons."

"Self-employed, Mr. Birrell?"

"You put it very considerately."

"Engaged in writing — and with a pen rather than a typewriter. I recommend the latter; it is no source of callouses."

Our client smiled, a trifle wanly. "I never found a machine conductive to creative work."

"We've read the papers, of course, Mr. Birrell, but let us for the moment assume that we haven't. May we hear your story?"

"Certainly, Mr. Pons. I suppose the best place to begin is at dinner last evening, when Mr. Bowne told me he had just had a letter asking him to an urgent appointment last night. He didn't say why or where he was going; that wasn't his custom. Directly after dinner, I went to my quarters. I had a book I wished to read, and I wanted to listen to a program on the B. B. C. It was the servants' night off, and I heard them go soon after I left the table."

"One moment," interposed Pons. "At the moment that Mr. Bowne mentioned having to go out, was anyone else in the room?"

"No, Mr. Pons."

"Thank you. Pray continue."

"Well, Mr. Bowne was upstairs and down, getting ready to go. He stopped once at the threshold to ask what I was reading. I said, 'Eliot.' 'I'm afraid he's beyond me,' he said. 'When I was a student we didn't read stuff like that.' We laughed. He said I shouldn't be surprised if he came home quite late. Then he went downstairs for the last time. He went into his study, which is just below my quarters. Then he left the house by the French windows, which open out of the study. He was on the way to the garage for his car.

"He couldn't have got far from the house when I stepped over to open a window. At that very moment I heard a dull sound—like a fall—then a groan. I thought of Mr. Bowne at once and called out to him. He didn't answer, though I was convinced he couldn't have reached the garage in so short a time. I ran down immediately and out of the house the way he had gone.

"Mr. Pons, I found him lying on the walk next to a little grove of yew. I thought I heard someone running—then the noise of a motor starting, but I can't be sure because, of course, I didn't think of murder. There was no reason why I should. We live quiet lives. We surely had no enemies. I thought Mr. Bowne had had an attack of some kind. It was the most natural thing for me just to pick him up and carry him back into the house. It wasn't until I got into the study that I noticed he had been struck violently on the side of his head. My clothes were bloodied where his head rested.

"I was horrified. I laid him on

a lounge in the study. I ran to the telephone at once and called Dr. Fielding of Birdlip. Then I returned to Mr. Bowne. He was still breathing. As I unbuttoned his topcoat and loosened his collar, he opened his eyes. I don't think he saw me clearly. He tried to speak. I listened very closely, but what he said didn't seem to make very much sense."

"But you *did* hear what he said, Mr. Birell."

"Yes, Mr. Pons. He said this: 'Go . . . read . . . box . . . sovereign . . . moor tell you . . . ask moor . . . read . . . linnet start from . . . nest . . . don't think badly of me, Angus.' That was all, Mr. Pons. He died in my arms."

Pons had copied down Bowne's last words as Birrell repeated them. "Curious, curious," he muttered, his eyes dancing. "What do you think Mr. Bowne meant by his dying adjuration to you, Mr. Birrell?"

"Mr. Pons, I haven't the vaguest idea. Mr. Bowne took me as a boy when my father, an old friend of his, died. He has been more than a father to me, and as you know—since it has already been widely bruited about," our client added bitterly, "I am his sole heir. I'm well aware of what many people are thinking. Even my profession is against me, since writers are forever in need of money."

"Have you been published, Mr. Birrell?" asked Pons.

"Yes. In Mr. Wyndham Lewis's *Blast,* Mr. Lindsay's *London Aphrodite,* and in the American *Little Review.*"

"Ah, an *avant-gardist,*" said Pons.

"Mr. Bowne was sympathetic, Mr. Pons."

Pons nodded thoughtfully and changed the subject. "I've observed that the newspapers refer to your late benefactor as 'retired'. No mention is made of the position from which he retired. Can you tell me?"

"When I was a boy, Mr. Pons, he was off for indefinite lengths of time. Irregularly. I always thought he was in some kind of business which required him to travel. Since that time, he has spent his time in his gardens and about his grounds, which were modestly extensive."

" 'Since then', you say, Mr. Birrell. How long is it, approximately, since Mr. Bowne retired?"

"Fifteen years or so."

"He would then have been forty, since he was fifty-five when he was slain last night, according to the press reports."

"I was then ten," said our client.

"Mr. Bowne was evidently a man of independent means."

"I'm not familiar with his affairs. To the best of my knowl-

edge, he received payments of some kind by post."

"By the month or the quarter?"

"Neither. They were not at all regular. Sometimes they came twice a quarter, sometimes not for four to six months."

"Did Mr. Bowne at any time offer you an explanation of such remittances as he received?"

"No, sir," said our client somewhat stiffly. "There was no reason why he should do so."

"Quite so. How did he customarily spend his evenings?"

"He frequented a pub in Birdlip on some evenings. He played whist with a group of neighbors one evening a week. The rest of his time he spent reading. He was a great reader, Mr. Pons, and even if he had little sympathy for experimental prose and verse, he had sound tastes, very sound. Hardy, Fielding, Dickens, Galsworthy, Keats, Shakespeare—all of them. And he was always very much interested in history, archaeology, anthropolgy, and such subjects. He had quite a library and never lacked a book to read."

"We could do with more people of such tastes," observed Pons. "You aren't aware of any enemies he might have had?"

"No, Mr. Pons. How could he have made them? I've asked myself that a hundred times since last night. He was rather oftener a loser at whist than a winner. He was an indifferent darts player at the pub. He never gambled more than a bob at a time. He was a conservative, solitary-minded country gentleman. That he should have been struck down so wantonly fills me with the greatest confusion. It is monstrous. It is a base crime without a motive."

"Say rather without an obvious motive," replied Pons. "Times and events may provide one. Could anything have been taken from his pockets in the interval between your call from the window and your arrival beside him?"

"If so, I wouldn't know what it was. His wallet was intact; as far as I know, nothing had been taken from it. He wasn't in the habit of carrying more than ten pounds at the very most; he had eight on him. But there would hardly have been time to rifle his pockets, Mr. Pons. Believe me. I lost no time reaching him."

At this point, Detective-Sergeant Burnham cleared his throat and caught our client's eye.

"Oh yes, there's one thing should be mentioned," Birrell said then. "The thing in his pocket. Mr. Bowne wore a topcoat . . . "

"It did seem on examination that the pockets of the topcoat had been looked into," said the Detective-Sergeant in a flat, reportorial voice. "That it did. One flap up and part of the lining pulled out."

"But there was this thing in the pocket of his jacket," Birrell continued. "Detective-Sergeant Burnham has it."

The Detective-Sergeant reached into his pocket and produced a strange little cylindrical container. It appeared to be made of wood, with mosaic decorations on top and bottom. The letters of the alphabet, quite jumbled, decorated the sides in twenty-four columns and seven circular rows. He handed it to Pons, whose eyes lit up with pleasure at sight of it.

"Mr. Bowne's?" asked Pons.

"I've never seen it before," answered our client. "I couldn't actually testify that it belonged to him."

"Evidence suggests that it did," said Burnham phlegmatically. "It was carried from the house; it could hardly have been put into his pocket outside. His topcoat was buttoned; it hadn't been unbuttoned except by Mr. Birrell here after Mr. Bowne was carried into the house."

Pons turned it about in his fingers. He held it to one ear and shook it. It bore every evidence of being a solid block of wood cut into cylindrical shape and ornamented by some carver's intricate art.

"It's old," offered Detective-Sergeant Burnham. "You can see it's worn."

Pons nodded. He glanced again at our client. "Yet you've never seen this object in Mr. Bowne's possession or in the house?"

"No, sir." Birrell flushed a little. "I'm not in the habit of looking about where it's none of my business. I never was. Mr. Bowne brought me up to mind my own affairs."

"Commendable," murmured Pons. "What, precisely, was the general relationship between your benefactor and yourself?"

"Each of us went his own way. I suppose you could say we were good friends and good companions."

"You discussed each other's daily occupations?"

"Not to any very great extent, Mr. Pons. We talked about the weather and the gardens. He was always interested whenever I placed something with a magazine. And very often when he received one of his remittances we celebrated by going out to dinner."

"Let us return for a moment to the message your benefactor received which, he told you, summoned him to an urgent appointment last night. Who customarily took in the post?"

"I did. I always have work on submission to the magazines, and I naturally wait word on it."

"And yesterday?"

"I took in the post, Mr. Pons, as usual."

"Was there anything in it which might have been the mes-

sage Mr. Bowne said he had received?"

"I've thought about that, sir. I don't think there was. Mr. Bowne had only two letters. One was a tradesman's bill. The other was a notice of expiration from a magazine to which he subscribed."

"So that a message such as he described must have been delivered by hand?"

"It would seem so."

"Yet Mr. Bowne was preparing to use his car to go to the appointment. Would he have done so for a meeting in Birdlip?"

"No, Mr. Pons. He liked to walk too well."

"The meeting then was some place beyond Birdlip."

"I took it that it was—from his plan to use the car and from his saying he might be late."

"The question is," put in Detective-Sergeant Burnham, "will you lend us a hand, then, Mr. Pons?"

"I'll be happy to do so, Sergeant. I have had all of three days without a single problem to tax me, and I am near to suffocating of boredom. One thing—I would like to retain this little cylinder until tomorrow."

"Certainly, sir."

"Then you may expect us at the Royal George in Birdlip by noon tomorrow. Failing any word from you, Sergeant, I will wait upon Mr. Birrell at the scene of the tragedy directly after luncheon."

After our visitors had taken their leave, Pons said dryly, "The circumstances seem to have taken on a different complexion."

"On the contrary," I said heatedly, "only if you accept Birrell's story at face value."

"Detective-Sergeant Burnham, who has evidently known Birrell for some time, put enough credence in his account to come to London with him. The Sergeant seems sound enough."

"If I have not mistaken the trend of your inquiries, Pons, the message Bowne received was intended to lure him to his death. Yet Birrell, by his own admission, was the only other person to know of Bowne's appointment."

"Not quite," said Pons softly, "there was also the person who wrote it. I think we may safely conjecture that the author of the message was not the man whose name was signed to it."

I would have protested farther, but Pons held up a restraining hand.

"In matters of this kind, Parker, one must begin either by accepting the available evidence or rejecting it. Plainly, you reject it. Let us start by accepting it. Our client is clearly not a fool. Fools are not commonly published in the magazines in which his work has appeared. He is a man of intelligence, a trifle bitter at the world and somewhat frustrated

because his ambition to make a name for himself as a writer is not being fulfilled soon enough to please him—a fate common to thousands of men and women who take up pen in the mistaken delusion that writing is an easy way to earn a living. I submit that he is far too intelligent to commit so bungling a crime. Had he wished to eliminate his benefactor, I rather think he would have worked out an ingenious scheme. Something in the line of a death trap to be sprung when he was miles away—perhaps in London—surely that would be truer to his nature."

"Perhaps I'm prejudiced against him," I conceded.

"Patently. His very manner offends you. Moreover, you have scant patience with scribblers of modern ephemera, and the newspaper accounts have helped make up your mind. This little matter promises unexpected ramifications to come. At the outset, there are several points about it which intrigue me. Mr. Bowne's dying message, for one . . ."

"Which we have solely on the word of the principal suspect," I put in.

Pons ignored me. ". . . The intruder on the scene at whose presence our client only hinted—mark it well; he has not *claimed* someone was there, but only that he *thought* someone had been running, a poor defense if such it was intended to be—and, finally, this little box. What do you make of it?"

So saying, he tossed it to me. I examined it carefully. It was light to hold. Because of the mosaic decoration, I could not determine of what wood it was wrought, but I thought it was of yew. It was smooth to the touch, testifying to its age.

"Hold it to your ear and shake it," instructed Pons.

I did so. "It whispers!" I cried.

"Does it not!" exclaimed Pons. "There is manifestly something in it—I should make it paper or some such substance."

"Then it is hollow!"

"An elementary deduction, Parker. If I am not mistaken, it holds the key to the mystery."

"How can you say so without more than such a casual glance?" I protested.

"Why, that, too, is elementary if we accept our client's account. Mr. Bowne had an appointment. He carried no briefcase, book, paper—nothing of that sort—nor any large sum of money. But he *did* carry this most unusual box. It is not too much to suppose that his appointment concerned this box in some fashion of which we have yet to learn."

"What is the thing?"

"Why, it's a sovereign box." He took it from my fingers, and began to turn the lettered rings, which I saw now were not wrought of a solid piece of wood.

"Ah, it comes apart then," I said.

"Must it not if it contains something?"

Pons sat for some time working at the mosaic cylinder. He turned one ring after another, repeatedly. He turned several together, clockwise and counter-clockwise. By watching him closely, I concluded that he was attempting to arrange some of the letters on the box to spell words—or at least one word—from top to bottom. It seemed to me an utterly futile task and I said as much.

"Why, there must be close to two hundred combinations which are possible. Do you mean to try them all?"

"If need be. However, since there are twenty-four letters in each ring, and but seven rings, the possible combinations forming words are very limited. Indeed, I very much doubt that it would be likely to formulate more than one word. This cylinder is intricately and carefully-wrought by a craftsman whose hand has long been stilled. Let me concentrate."

Half an hour passed. I had long since returned to my perusal of the evening papers when Pons cried out.

"England! The word is *England!*" cried Pons triumphantly.

I came to my feet and strode to his side even as the mosaic cylinder came apart in his hands. He had clearly found the combination which unlocked the cylinder by spelling the word *England* downwards. A vertical slot was thus brought into line in the yew-wood rings which formed the inner lining of the box, and this allowed ivory teeth which held it together to be withdrawn. The sovereign box lay in two parts before Pons—the outer shell, consisting of inner and outer rings and top, and the bottom, attached to a hollow cone down one side of which projected the ivory teeth.

Pons upended the hollow cone. A little curl of paper fluttered out. Pons snatched it up in his lean fingers and in a trice had it spread out before him.

What was written on the paper in somewhat faded ink was this:

The linnet starts from its nest
And goes high up into the west

Nothing more.

I stared at Pons in astonishment. "What on earth does it mean?"

His eyes danced with delight. "Patience, Parker, patience. We shall just see. But does this not touch a chord or two in your memory?"

"Surely this is riddle enough without your propounding more," I cried.

Pons smiled. "Pray indulge me. Let us consult Mr. Bowne's dying words." He drew over the pad upon which he had written what our client had reported Bowne

had said. "Ah, yes—here we are —'box . . . sovereign'—well, Parker, this is a sovereign box; I am confident that we can safely overlook the involuntary inversion in Mr. Bowne's labored speech. And here we have 'linnet starts from . . . nest'." He rubbed his hands together in a gratified manner. "We seem to have made a start, Parker."

"But what is the significance of these lines?" I pressed him.

"It would appear to be a rhymed couplet."

"Aha! I see. And our client is a poet."

"I don't recall that he admitted to writing poetry, though your deduction isn't out of place, in view of his liking for Eliot. I suspect, however, that the point is irrelevant; I fear Mr. Birrell would have little regard for this couplet as poetry."

"Is it in code, then?"

"If so, a most ingenious one. Only a comparatively brief message could be hidden in these two lines. Yet I am convinced it is a message of some kind. It is plainly this which he was expected to bring to his appointment and which carried Bowne to his death instead. It follows, therefore, that someone else knew of the existence of this cylinder; if a name was signed to the letter Bowne received, then two other people at least knew of it, since the signature would certainly have been that of a man Bowne would expect to know all about it."

"That presupposes the involvement of two people our client at least does not suspect."

"I fancy Mr. Birrell has lived a long while in a world of his own creation," said Pons cryptically. "Now, let me see what can be done to solve the riddle of this couplet."

So saying, he pushed the mosaic cylinder aside and bent to the paper.

Though his light burned late that night, Pons gave no indication next morning that he had solved the puzzle of the paper; indeed, I saw by his knit brows and clouded eyes that he had not, and when I asked him, as we boarded a train at Paddington for Cheltenham at seven-thirty, he said only, "It is not a formal code."

With that I had to be content, for he offered no further comment, either immediately or during the three and a half hour ride through the lovely spring countryside on our way to the Cotswolds. He sat in our compartment shrouded in silence, while his hawklike face was host to a variety of lively emotions—from time to time a suggestive smile touched his thin lips, sometimes his eyes laughed; at other times he sat with his eyes closed, the fingers of one hand fondling the lobe of an ear. He was obviously in no

mood to brook interruption, and I held my own counsel throughout the journey to Malvern Road Station in Cheltenham.

There at last Pons seemed to come to life. He began to talk animatedly of the picturesque cottages with their mullioned windows and stone-slabbed roofs we were destined to see in the Cotswold country, and he expressed his pleasure at seeing again Leckhampton Hill, which was on our course to Birdlip two miles out of Cheltenham. But of the problem in hand, he uttered not a word, much to my disappointment.

We took a cab at the station in Cheltenham and set out for Birdlip, which was only a short drive from the city. Except for exclamations of delight at some particularly attractive stone frontage or vista, Pons rode in silence. On our right rose the rampart of the great escarpment, a ridge of impressively beautiful hills, made all the more so by the soft green of the beech woods which began to show on their near slopes at Birdlip.

The Royal George at Birdlip was a small hotel of but eight beds. Pons took a room on the top floor, from which the windows afforded us a magnificent view of the Cotswold country. At Birdlip and south from there, the escarpment was less imposing, and perhaps because of this, more beautiful, with beech woods and the hills rising skyward on the one side of Birdlip, and on the other the descending wolds, which lay like a dream with clusters of dwellings, groves, streams and lovely vales.

"We are in the midst of antiquities here, Parker," observed Pons.

"As old as that mosaic cylinder?" I asked, not without a touch of sarcasm.

"Far older. At the very site of this hotel there was a posting station during the Roman occupation, and Roman remains abound throughout the region. Even older—the Dobuni who ruled on Cotswold before the Romans have left their traces and artifacts, sparingly found, to be sure—like the pieces once belonging to their queen now to be seen at Gloucester Museum."

"It may come as a surprise to you," I replied with some asperity, "but I have a slight acquaintance with British history. Considerably more than I have of the problem in hand."

Pons smiled wintrily. "You over-rate my poor powers if you suggest I know much more of this intriguing problem than you, Parker. I have certain suspicions, true, but knowledge, no. Come, let us take a little lunch and be on our way."

After lunch, Pons enquired at the desk whether any message had been left for him. None had. Thereupon, with ostentation un-

usual for him, he asked to be directed to the home of the late Cecil Bowne. He seemed to take unwonted pleasure at the attention he stirred by mention of his name, and his manifest intention of pressing an enquiry into the murder.

"You did yourself proud," I could not help saying when we were on our way on foot through the village.

"Ah, Parker, one can never tell upon what shores the ripples of village gossip may touch," he observed. "These are dark waters."

The object of our search lay on the south edge of Birdlip. It was a country house, evidently remodeled and made rather more modern, for all the untouched outbuildings were of the native stone and obviously very old. There were several of these, in a semicircle, well apart one from another, between the house and the edge of the village. Immediately beside the lane as we came to it was the garage; beyond it stood a dark grove of yew trees, and beyond this grove the other outbuildings, curved around the house at a respectable distance from it. The house itself stood away at a slight angle from the yew grove, and the French windows through which our client's benefactor had walked to his death were plain to see, for the area from the windows to the grove was roped off, evidently by the police, and very probably for Pons' examination.

Pons entered the grounds and made directly for the grove along the limestone walk from the garage. A small pool of dried blood marked the spot where Bowne had been struck down. It could be seen on a stone in the walk just opposite a thick-boled yew, which indicated where Bowne's murderer might have stood—if Birrell's testimony could be accepted without question.

Characteristically, Pons ignored the walk entirely and gave all his attention to the edge of the grove. First he came to his knees at the base of the old yew next to the site of the attack on Bowne; then he took out his magnifying glass and scrutinized the trunk of the tree, from the bark of which he removed some infinitesimal threads or hairs and put them into a small envelope. He came around the tree just as our client emerged from the house to greet us.

"I'm happy to se you," said Birrell.

"And I to find that the good Sergeant hasn't yet put you in irons, Mr. Birrell," said Pons.

"Will you come in, gentlemen?" Birrell turned to lead the way back to the house. "I should tell you, Mr. Pons—I've not been idle this morning. I got hold of Mr. Harris, Mr. Bowne's solicitor, and the two of us went to

his bank to make some proper enquiries there. I trust I interpreted the direction of your questions last evening correctly, sir?"

"Ah. You asked about the source of Mr. Bowne's income?"

"Exactly. Mr. Pons, apart from the few dividends on investments, really of little consequence, that he received, for the past fifteen years my benefactor's principal source of income has been his old schoolmaster, the late Cornelius Muir."

"Muir," murmured Pons thoughtfully. "Muir." He stood for a moment at the French windows. "Did he not once publish a monograph on Britain's Roman antiquities?"

"That's the man, Mr. Pons. Mr. Bowne was a student of his at a small private college in Bristol when Muir taught there. History and archeology were his subjects, I believe. Then Muir turned to collecting and retired from the teaching profession. Evidently Mr. Bowne was of some continuing service to him. Only," he added, speaking with hesitation, "I'm hanged if I know when it could have been, for I can't recall that he ever visited Muir. At least, he didn't do so, to my knowledge. Yet the remittances came with fair regularity in their uncertain pattern over a decade and a half."

"Were they in equal amounts?" asked Pons.

"That's a rather perplexing aspect, sir—they varied greatly. Naturally, I thought at once—and so did Mr. Harris—that Muir might possibly have made some investments in his name for his former student. The great variation among payments leaves considerable doubt as to this."

"What were the limits of that variation?"

"From two to one hundred seventeen pounds," answered Birrell. "I don't know much of financial matters, investments and the like, but it seems to me highly unlikely that there exists any stock or bond issue which would pay off such varied amounts in such short and irregular periods of time. I'm under the impression that dividends are seldom paid oftener than annually or semi-annually—rarely quarterly—but these payments were made without any plan at all except their very marked irregularity. That seems to have been the rule from the beginning."

"Interesting," said Pons crisply, his eyes twinkling.

"But come in, please."

Our client stood aside while Pons and I entered the study of the house, a somewhat cramped room all available wall-space of which was occupied by deep shelves packed with books. A glance at the titles confirmed our client's statement that his late benefactor's literary tastes were very sound; almost nothing of a

lighter nature, except a single novel by Compton Mackenzie, met my eye. A lounge against one panelled wall, slightly recessed under shelving, was evidently the spot where Cecil Bowne had died the previous night, for a white cloth poorly concealed a blood-stain.

Pons stood just inside the French windows, saying nothing. His keen eyes darted here and there. I saw him glance toward the ceiling, then toward the threshold opening on to the hall and the stairs beyond, and deduced that he was computing the time it would have taken our client to rush from his room to the side of his stricken benefactor.

Presently Pons spoke. "I don't recall your mentioning anything about a weapon last night, Mr. Birrell. Was one found?"

"No, sir."

"The inference being that the murderer made off with it?"

"I should think so. Dr. Fielding gave it as his opinion that the weapon used was either a poker or an iron bar, and he will so testify at the inquest two days hence."

"If, as circumstances suggest, the mosaic cylinder or sovereign box found in Mr. Bowne's pocket was kept on the premises, where would your late benefactor have been likely to keep it?"

Our client strode across to the wall above the lounge and removed a section of books from a shelf at shoulder height, revealing a wall safe behind.

"Here, sir."

"You have the combination?" asked Pons.

"No. But it will surely be found among his papers in his box at the bank."

"If Mr. Bowne had a deposit box, what was he likely to keep here?"

"I don't know, Mr. Pons. I've never looked into it, even when it stood open on such occasions as I happened to come into the room when he was at it. Papers, perhaps. Or such things as the sovereign box."

"Let us return to the remittances your benefactor received for so long a time," said Pons then. "When was the last of them received?"

"Five weeks ago almost to the day, Mr. Pons. A week before Muir died of a heart attack, quite suddenly."

"In what amount?"

"Twenty pounds."

"There have been no payments since then?"

"None."

"Nor any communications from Muir's estate?"

"None, Mr. Pons. Muir was a widower; there were no children. His nearest relative is, I believe, a cousin in Canada. I really don't know the circumstances relating to the disposal of his estate, but I suppose these matters are in the hands of his solicitors. Enquiry

could be made at Gloucester, where he lived."

Pons nodded absently. From the pocket of his jacket he took out a slip of paper which he handed to our client.

"Have you ever read these lines before, Mr. Birrell?"

Our client glanced at the couplet discovered in the mosaic cylinder. His face was expressionless, save for a faint air of disapproval which came into it presently. "Never, Mr. Pons. This is meant to be a rhymed couplet, but as poetry, it's bad, very bad. The metre is abominable." He did not ask how Pons had come by it, but his eyes betrayed a lively curiosity which Pons had no intention of satisfying at the moment.

"They mean no more to you?"

"No." His brows came down darkly. "Should they?"

"If they should, you would know it, Mr. Birrell."

Our client glanced at the couplet again, then, baffled, handed it back to Pons, who reached into his pocket once more, took out the mosaic cylinder, and opened it. He restored the couplet to its hiding place and closed the sovereign box again.

Birrell watched in fascination. I could not be positive, but it seemed to me his astonishment was too genuine to have been feigned.

"Mr. Pons, what does it mean?"

"At this moment, I myself am not sure, though I'm beginning to draw certain inferences from it," answered Pons.

Our client made no attempt to press Pons further. "Is there anything you would care to examine here, sir?" he asked.

"I should like to take a look at your benefactor's recent correspondence," said Pons. "We should determine, if possible, with whom his appointment was made on the night of his death."

"Oh, that. I can spare you the trouble," said our client, striding over toward a desk in one corner of the study. "I think this is what you're looking for."

He handed Pons a small fold of paper, evidently torn from a common tablet. I looked over his shoulder as he read the message typewritten on it—

"Bowne: We'd better get together before it's too late. How about Tuesday evening next, 8:30 or 9:00, my place? You can get around easier than I can these days. Reed."

Pons shot a glance of enquiry toward Birrell.

"I believe that would be Austin Reed at Tewkesbury. Mr. Bowne had a very spare correspondence. Apart from Muir and the customary business affairs about taxes and investments, he wrote to only three people, and these only occasionally—to Reed, a cousin of his named Carroll in

Edinburgh, and a Mr. Sidney Hawes of Bishop's Cleeve."

"If you have their precise addresses, I'll take them down."

"Certainly, Mr. Pons."

Our client, not without some obvious bafflement, copied down the addresses Pons wanted from what appeared to be the late Bowne's address-book.

"Muir's, too, if you don't mind," said Pons.

"But he's dead!"

"Just the same—I may have need for it."

As he handed the list of addresses to Pons, our client shook his head and said, "I must confess, Mr. Pons, your methods leave me more puzzled than ever."

"At this juncture, Mr. Birrell, an investigation must proceed blindly. I think we have finshed here, at least for the time being. Once we've returned this interesting little cylinder to Detective-Sergeant Burnham, I shall consider what line of enquiry to follow. . . . By the way, Mr. Bowne's murderer was a slender man, very agile, about five feet, three inches in height, wearing on the night of the murder what I take to be brown tweed."

Pons thereupon thanked our client, and we took our leave. Birrell stood with astonishment on his features, but I could see also that he was disappointed and plainly felt that he was locked out of Pons' investigation. His dark looks followed us from the house to the lane.

Through tea, which Pons had sent up to our quarters at the Royal George, he sat absorbed before his notes, his eyes narrowed and thoughtful. But from time to time a thin smile played about his austere face, and his eyes danced. At last he leaned back.

"In the light of such discoveries as we have made, Parker, what do you make of it?"

"Precious few discoveries we've made," I retorted. "And what the devil did you mean by telling Birrell his benefactor's murderer was a short, slender man?"

"Oh, come, Parker—that is surely as elementary a deduction as I could possibly have made. Even you could have made it. If a man leans against a tree and his shoulders, judging by the brown tweed threads left on the rough bark, come to roughly four feet, three inches, and there is scarcely an imprint to mark where he waited, it's hardly a feat to conclude that he was slight of build and short of stature. That little matter, however, is relatively inconsequential. Let us consider Bowne's dying statement again. Does it not take on new light?"

"I am afraid I see very little light, Pons."

"Come, come, it isn't as bad as that. Look at his first words—

'Go . . . read . . . box sovereign' . . ."

"Ah, that clearly means our client was intended to read the couplet in the mosaic cylinder," I said.

"An excellent example of the misinterpretation of circumstances," observed Pons dryly. "It could hardly have meant that, when Bowne might have shown his ward the message at any time in the course of several years. No, I fancy it meant, 'Go to see Austin Reed.' Now then—'moor tell you . . . ask moor.' I submit that what Bowne said was 'Muir,' in the confused state of his mind forgetting that Muir had died. Then he repeated 'read', which, following so close upon 'ask Muir' must certainly refer to asking 'Reed'. The quotation from the couplet is obvious, of course. What do you make of his dying adjuration, Parker? 'Do not think badly of me, Angus.' Is that not a curious final statement?"

"It suggests that Bowne had been guilty of some wrong."

"Towards Angus?"

"Possibly."

"I submit that Bowne's adjuration referred to what Angus Birrell was destined to learn if and when he followed his benefactor's dying instructions. Our client himself has said he hadn't the vaguest idea of what Bowne could have meant, and stressed the fact that Bowne had been very good to him. Moreover, Birrell is his sole heir." Pons shook his head. "I think we may definitely conclude that Bowne's reference was toward what was to come, not to anything which had already affected their relationship."

I conceded that this made sense.

"Now let us turn for a moment to this note so casually making an appointment which Bowne evidently never thought of not keeping. What do you deduce from it?" Pons tossed it to me as he spoke.

I read it carefully once more. "For one thing," I said cautiously, "it is entirely typewritten, including the signature. Anyone could have written and sent it."

"Certainly Reed did not," agreed Pons. "Go on."

"Reed had reason for haste. There is a note of urgence in the letter."

"Capital, capital, Parker! I am happy to see this development in your ability to rationalize. Go on."

"So that if Bowne unhesitatingly responded to it, he, too, must have recognized that urgence. It must then have been a common urgence."

Pons' eyes danced with delight. "You do me proud, Parker! Quite so. Pray continue."

"Reed writes that Bowne can get around easier than Reed can. So Reed must have been ill or unable to travel far, and Bowne must have known this not to

have questioned the source of his letter."

"He corresponded with him."

"Well, that seems to be the sum total of what's to be made of this," I said, handing the note back to him.

He folded it and restored it to his pocket. "Except for one thing. The urgent matter which inspired both the note and Bowne's willingness to accept it was almost certainly the death of Cornelius Muir. Something subsequent to that may have heightened the urgence of the matter. 'We'd better get together before it's too late.' Too late for what—if not the solution of the riddle of the mosaic cylinder? I submit, Parker, that Reed also owns a portion of the 'poem' begun with the couplet in Bowne's cylinder. By the same token, we had better lose no time in getting to Reed. I fancy we can hire a car and driver to take us up the Severn valley. I shall be happy to see Tewkesbury again; it is surely one of the most attractive towns in all England."

A lithe, short-statured young man answered our knock at Austin Reed's door. He held the door ajar only a little way and looked out at us suspiciously, his hard blue eyes clearly hostile.

"Mr. Austin Reed?" asked Pons.

"Can't see him. He's abed. Very ill."

Pons took from his pocket the note sent to Bowne, wrote across the back of it, "Must speak to you about this. Solar Pons," and handed it to the reluctant young man guarding the threshold.

"Take this to Mr. Reed at once," he commanded.

"I'll do it, but it won't do any good," said the young man, in a somewhat more courteous manner, now that he had caught sight of Pons' signature. "I'm sorry to seem so ungracious—but we've been upset by the burglary and all. I'll take it to him. Just step inside and wait. I'm Harold Reed, his son."

He opened the door to us and walked away.

We stepped into the hallway and looked around. The house seemed to be reasonably well appointed; it was not a wealthy man's home, but it was certainly not a poor man's dwelling. But we had little time to examine our surroundings, for young Reed's quickened footsteps sounded very soon.

"Come in, gentlemen," he said. "Come in. Your note excited Father."

He showed us into a bedroom, where a gaunt man of sixty-odd years lay in what seemed to me a terminal illness. He was grizzled for lack of shaving, and his condition was fully as grave as his son had hinted. Bony fingers trembled on the note Pons had sent in, and, as Pons bent to retrieve it, the sick man spoke.

"Not mine. Not mine," he said.

"Father means he didn't write this message, sir," said young Reed.

The sick man turned feebly toward his son. "Box . . . Harry. Get me . . . box."

A little impatiently, the younger man replied, "Dad—it's gone. Don't you remember? It was stolen." He turned to Pons and explained. "He's talking about a little curio he had here. He set great store by it, though I never could see that it had any value. Father always said that little box assured our future."

Pons took Bowne's mosaic cylinder from his pocket. "Like this, Mr. Reed?"

Young Reed's eyes widened. "Yes, sir. That's it! Where did you find it?"

"No, Mr. Reed. This is not it, but only one similar to it. It was found night before last in the pocket of a murdered man. It had belonged to him."

"Alike as two peas," said the younger Reed, staring at the sovereign box as if unable to take his eyes from it. Indeed, his fingers trembled with excitement or eagerness as he held out his hand as if to take it for a moment before he withdrew it.

"Your father's was stolen," pressed Pons. "When?"

"A week ago, sir. Someone entered the house one night. Father had been in hospital in Gloucester for a while, and I was there part of the time—living in Gloucester, to be near him—and when we got back here the day after I went down to bring him home, we saw someone had broken in by the back door."

"When was this?" interrupted Pons.

"Ten days ago. We couldn't find that anything had been taken—but when Father asked for his curio, it was gone. Since it was here when I left for Gloucester, it must have been stolen while I was gone. I asked the nurse about it, but she hadn't touched it—hadn't even seen it, according to her, and that's probably true because Father kept it behind some books on the top shelf of his little library."

The elder Reed began to speak suddenly, brokenly, with gasping effort. "Hawes first . . . blinded . . . Bowne next . . . Then me . . . Blinded—all blinded . . . Sworn to secrecy . . . Never told . . . None of us . . . He bound us . . . We pledged him . . . Counted on us . . . Trusted him . . . Hard work . . . careful . . . by night . . . Harry—Harry—the box . . . The box!"

"Dad, it's gone," said his son patiently.

"Lost. All lost," murmured the older man.

"Semi-delirious," I could not keep from pointing out. "What

he says is probably dredged up from the past but has some meaning for him."

"And for us," said Pons sharply, motioning me to silence.

The old man lay with eyes closed now, breathing heavily from the exertion of speaking at such length. The fingers of his right hand twitched in a grasping motion, as if he dreamed of attempting to seize hold of some object.

"The box—Harry," he muttered again. "All lost . . . All gone . . . Her diadem . . . Cross . . . red and the green . . . Great queen! . . . I promise—on my honor—as English gentleman—to speak no word . . . to speak no word. So are we . . . bound . . . we four . . ." And again he half raised up in bed and cried out, "Harry—Harry . . . the box!"

Then he fell back, utterly exhausted.

"Pons, we dare not stir him farther," I protested.

Pons nodded absently. His eyes strayed from the old man in the bed and fell upon a typewriter in an alcove nearby.

"I wonder, Mr. Reed," he said to the younger man, "whether you would be so kind as to insert this false message into your machine and type to my dictation."

"Certainly, Mr. Pons."

Pons handed him the message Bowne had received, watched him insert it into the typewriter, and then dictated, "Not written by Austin Reed"— "Now just sign it, Mr. Reed."

The younger Reed did as he was asked, whereupon Pons bade him good-day, and we withdrew.

Outside once more, I said, "Well, that was surely a fruitless visit. Except for the matter of a second cylinder, we heard nothing but the disconnected ravings of delirium. Did you expect to turn up another sovereign box?"

"Say rather I was not surprised to learn of the existence of a second. As for not learning anything—alas! Parker, you disappoint me grievously. We have just learned all."

"Pons! You cannot mean it!"

"I was never more in earnest. Those disconnected ravings, as you called them, unlocked the secret of the mosaic cylinders. And even a cursory glance at what Reed typed at my dictation tells us that message and dictation were written on the same machine." He looked at his watch. "It is late in the day, but I think we had better go on to Bishop's Cleeve and look up Sidney Hawes."

We reached our destination at dusk, but though we found the house of Sidney Hawes without trouble, it was dark save for a small night light. Nevertheless, Pons' knock brought a response from within, and the turning up of a stronger light.

"Who is it?" came in an uncertain voice.

"A friend of Sidney Hawes," answered Pons.

"Come in then. The door's not locked."

Pons opened the door and we walked in to find ourselves confronting a young man in an easy chair. It was manifest at once why he had not answered Pons' knock in person. He wore a heavy bandage on his head, and another on one arm. His legs were covered with a robe, despite the relative warmth of the evening, and it was not unlikely that he had difficulty getting about.

"Accident," said the young man cheerfully. "I expect you've not heard. I'm Tom Hawkins, his nephew."

Pons introduced himself and me. It amused me to see that Pons' name apparently meant nothing to Hawkins, a fact which was bound to touch Pons' vanity.

"Glad to know you, gentlemen. I'm sorry not to be a better host—but there's a decanter on the sideboard if you'd care to help yourselves. My uncle's man's out and I find it a little hard to get around the way I'd like."

"And Mr. Hawes?" asked Pons.

"My uncle—God rest his soul! —died in the accident, Mr. Pons. And him only fifty-six, too! I was driving the car—it was that, most likely, saved me from being thrown about when we went out of control and left the road."

"How long ago, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Three weeks, sir."

His cheerfulness had given way to a more proper gravity now; he bit his lip and sighed. "My uncle was a fine man, sir, in every respect."

"Badly injured?"

"Oh, no, sir. It wasn't that alone. It was just as much his heart. His heart had been bad, and I expect the shock of the accident and the scare and all did for him. He'd had a bad fall on the stairs just a day or two before, too. I don't know how the accident came about, and that's a fact. Something with the brake, they told me at the mechanic's. I can't understand it. The car was all right only the day before. Then that day my uncle decided sudden-like to go down to Birdlip and call on an old friend there. We set out, and got almost to Cheltenham when the brake gave out and away we went down the slope and off the road."

"You've not changed the name at the gate," I said. "We thought Mr. Hawes was to be found here."

"Oh, it's not my right to do that, sir. I'm staying here only until my cousin—his son—can get home from Calcutta. It's his place now, and I expect I'll move on as soon as he comes."

"Well, I won't say I'm not

disappointed, because I am," said Pons in an almost ingratiating manner. "But perhaps you can help me, Mr. Hawkins."

"Any friend of my uncle's has a claim on me, sir."

"Did your uncle mention the name of the man in Birdlip he meant to call upon?"

"Bowne, I think he said."

"And did your uncle own a curious little sovereign box decorated with letters of the alphabet and some mosaic scrollwork?" asked Pons bluntly.

Hawkins stared at him, astonished, for a full moment without reply. Then he said, "If my uncle had ever owned such a box, I'm sure he'd have told me about it. I've lived with him ten years, ever since his first heart attack—my cousin Horace couldn't come home, you see, and I was free to come—and there were precious few secrets he kept from me. My uncle kept his sovereigns where they still are, sir—in the bank at Cheltenham. I don't think it likely that such a box as you describe is in this house."

"Perhaps he kept it, too, in a deposit box," suggested Pons.

"I have access to his bank box, sir." He shook his head. "But what is this sovereign box?"

"A curio, Mr. Hawkins. An interesting curio which may have some bearing on a little problem I am at present investigating."

A light broke suddenly upon Hawkins' thin face. He sat up a little straighter, so that his robe fell away a little from his spare frame. "But, of course—it's Mr. Solar Pons, the London detective!" he cried. "Well, sir—I *am* honored! But what could you have wanted with my uncle?"

"I had hoped to ask him questions which unfortunately you cannot answer," replied Pons. "Apparently there were a few little secrets Mr. Hawes kept from you. Perhaps his son, once he reaches England, may have the answer to those questions. Thank you, sir, for your kindness to two travellers. We'll be on our way back to Birdlip."

"I'm sorry I can't see you to the door, gentlemen. But as you've been able to make your way in, you'll find your way out. Good night!"

Pons walked out in profound silence and got into the car for the journey back to Birdlip. It was not until we were well on our way that he broke the thoughtful meditation in which he had been plunged.

"I dislike coincidences, Parker, however much I know them to occur—much more frequently than we recognize. I submit that this chain of events is more than coincidence."

"Which chain of events?"

"That began with the death of Cornelius Muir, followed by the fatal accident which eliminated Sidney Hawes, the curious illness of Austin Reed, together with the

burglarious entry of the Reed home, and the murder of Cecil Bowne. These events suggest nothing to you?"

"Should they?"

"We have four men who were associated in some venture," Pons replied thoughtfully. "They were sworn to silence. Unfortunately —and fatefully—one of those men broke his pledge and precipitated the events which followed upon Muir's death."

"Ah," I said, "this is a familiar pattern. They robbed a train or a bank and have been systematically dividing the loot."

Pons laughed heartily. "I thank Providence for such little touches of humor as you manage to inject into the problems which come our way, Parker, I do indeed."

"It has all the aspects of lost treasure," I cried hotly.

"Lost—or found," said Pons sobering. "It does indeed."

He said no more, and we rode on in deep silence through the aromatic, night-bound countryside, Pons with his eyes closed against any distraction which might take his thoughts from the perplexing riddle of the mosaic cylinders. Nor did he venture a hint of what he had been thinking when we reached the Royal George, save only to remind me that in the morning we would go to Gloucester "to inquire into the role the late Cornelius Muir played in this little drama."

With this, he turned in and fell asleep at once.

Pons was up and about some time before I woke next morning. I had just finished breakfast when he came into the hotel, ready for the journey to Gloucester, which was but ten miles away. He wore one of those self-satisfied smiles I invariably found peculiarly annoying. He tossed a folded envelope at me. His name had been scrawled across its face.

"This was left for me during the night, Parker," he said.

The envelope was addressed to "Mr. Solar Pons" in broad pencilled script, and had the look of having been written in haste. No address appeared under Pons' name, suggesting that the note had been delivered by hand. The message inside was succinct and pointed.

"Don't meddle in what doesn't concern you. Go home, Mr. Nosey Pons." It was signed: "A Friend."

"I fancy our quarry has the wind up," observed Pons. "That classic signature is all too revealing. I have invariably found that only one who means you ill signs such communications 'A Friend'. I daresay we are uncomfortably close to the heart of this little matter."

"This doesn't have the sound of an ignorant fellow."

"Only an irritated and fearful one. He is literate enough. Bear

in mind that all the principal actors in this little entertainment have college backgrounds. Mr. Muir, ex-professor, and three students at his college. Does not that suggest anything to you?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Dear me, morning is not your best time, Parker. But come, let us be off," he said, starting away. "I have had opportunity, early as the hour is, to ascertain the name and address of the solicitor in charge of Muir's estate pending the arrival of the cousin from Canada, who would appear to be Muir's heir. Our business is first of all with Mr. Tooker this morning."

Mr. Norman Tooker proved to be a frosty gentleman of some seventy years, who maintained an office on Eastgate Street. He was expecting us.

"Ah, Mr. Pons," he said with dignified formality as we were announced and shown in, "and Dr. Parker. I've been waiting for you ever since the police advised me to expect you. What can I do for you?"

"I took the liberty of asking the police, with whom I am cooperating in an inquiry, to give you notice of my coming. I'm afraid I may have to ask you to answer some questions which may seem to you somewhat unethical," said Pons.

"Ah, involving a client," said Tooker, visibly drawing into himself.

"The late Cornelius Muir."

Mr. Tooker brightened a little. Manifestly, a dead client was not quite in the same category, ethically, as a living one. "A fine man. I knew him well. He was more than just a client. An old friend, I might say. Surely you can't expect me to believe that he had a part in any crime?"

"We are looking into the death of one of Mr. Muir's former students, and we have reason to believe there may be a connection, however remote, between the death of Mr. Muir and that of Mr. Bowne."

"Ah, the Birdlip assault case," murmured Tooker. "I make a habit of reading news of crime, Mr. Pons; I'm not uninformed. Besides . . ." And here he hesitated, looking strangely at Pons.

"Do go on, Mr. Tooker."

"I was about to say that in discharging the wishes of my late client, I was on the verge of posting him an envelope left for him by Mr. Muir."

Pons' eyes danced. "May I see it?"

Tooker selected one of three envelopes from a rack on his desk and handed it to Pons. "As you see, I addressed my communication to his estate. The envelope I referred to is inside."

Tooker had not yet gummed down the flap of his envelope. Apart from the customary notification to the addressee, covering the contents, there was but the

envelope to which Tooker had referred. It was addressed, I saw at a glance, in a hand that bore no resemblance to Tooker's signature appended to the covering letter—presumably, therefore, in the script of the late Cornelius Muir.

Pons held the sealed envelope between the thumb and forefinger of one hand. "Do you know what this contains, Mr. Tooker?"

"No, sir. I don't. This was left with Mr. Muir's instructions to forward unopened to the addressee."

"Let us just examine it."

Pons carried the envelope over to the window and held it up to the light. A smile touched his lips.

"Be good enough to take this down, Parker," he said, and read, slowly, " 'Thence by a mile, and turns to face / To where the setting sun last lays its golden grace.' "

"Mr. Pons, this is highly irregular," protested Tooker.

"I daresay it is. Murder, however, is even more so. Do you understand these lines, Mr. Tooker?"

"No, sir. I don't."

"Your late client was also evidently a poet."

"I believe more than one professor has fancied himself a creative writer, Mr. Pons."

"The lines are a couplet. They are written in what I take to be Muir's hand."

"I'm afraid it means nothing to me."

"It was evidently intended to mean something to Mr. Bowne, and," added Pons, pointing to two other envelopes which Tooker had prepared, of similar size and appearance, "also to Mr. Sidney Hawes and Mr. Austin Reed."

Tooker snatched up the envelopes in question, took out the inner envelopes, and hurried over to the window with them. He held them up against the pane, one in each hand.

"They are the same lines, are they not, Mr. Tooker?" asked Pons.

"They are indeed. Mr. Pons, I've heard of your ratiocinative powers . . ."

"Tut, tut, Mr. Tooker. This was not ratiocination at all, but simple conclusion following inevitably from the premise that these three gentlemen and Muir were associated in some venture of common interest. But let us pursue this further," he went on, as Tooker returned to his desk. "Are you familiar with your late client's accounts?"

"Of course, Mr. Pons."

"Some five weeks before his death, he paid Mr. Bowne by check the sum of twenty pounds. Ah, I see by your face that this strikes a chord in memory. Tell me, did he not also pay identical sums to Mr. Hawes and Mr. Reed at the same time?"

"He did."

"I submit, Mr. Tooker, that for the past fifteen years your late client made identical payments at irregular intervals to all three of these men, payments ranging all the way from two to a hundred seventeen pounds."

"Mr. Pons, I would have to check the figures, but I believe you are substantially correct."

"Why were these payments made?"

"I can't tell you that, Mr. Pons. I don't know."

"Perhaps you can tell us how Mr. Muir came by his income?"

"Mr. Muir was quite wealthy. He left a considerable estate, of which the death duties alone will take many thousands of pounds."

"Did he live on interest and dividends, Mr. Tooker?"

"He was a well-known collector of antiques and ancient artifacts. His house is cluttered with them even today, Mr. Pons, though he has been systematically selling his collection for a dozen years. There are checks here from Sotheby's, from the Parke-Bernet Gallery of New York, and from other sources."

"When was Mr. Muir's last sale made?"

"Let me see." Tooker opened a fat folder on his desk, put on his pince-nez, and scrutinized a sheet of paper, his lips working, his brow furrowed. "Here it is," he said presently. "Six weeks and three days ago. A jeweled Dobuni artifact to Sotheby's, who paid him a hundred ten pounds."

Pons nodded with ill-concealed satisfaction. "Do you think it might be possible to get into Muir's house?" he asked then.

"I'll take you there myself," said Tooker, and rang for his car.

The late Cornelius Muir's house stood in spacious, well-landscaped grounds on the bank of the Severn north of Gloucester. Its modest and relatively unpretentious exterior in no way prepared us for the crowded rooms inside. From the entranceway as far as one could see, and from room to room, the house was crowded with antiques and artifacts, the sight of which wrung a cry of delight from Pons. They were of all kinds—Roman, Celtic, Druidic, Dobuni, of Viking and Norman origin—indeed, it was patent at but a glance that Muir's home was little more than a private museum which must have represented an extensive investment.

"Has an inventory been made, Mr. Tooker?" asked Pons, when he had looked about.

"Not yet. People from the Gloucester Museum have been retained to do it, however." He asked anxiously, "Will you want a copy?"

"No, but I suggest that the police may. Frankly, Mr. Tooker, I didn't come here to view these splendid relics of bygone ages. I

have a fancy to see more of Mr. Muir's verses, if possible."

Mr. Tooker looked dubious. "I don't know if I can help, Mr. Pons. This field of his labors was unknown to me until today. —Unless, perhaps—his notebook?"

He crossed to a bookshelf in the study, where we were then standing, and took from it a looseleaf notebook which he brought back to Pons.

"He kept a good many notes and figures here, Mr. Pons—nothing vital in the same sense that his checkbook was vital—" here he permitted himself a wintry smile—"but of matters close to him."

Pons was already leafing through the book, saying nothing.

"It dates back quite a number of years," offered Tooker.

"Sixteen," said Pons dryly, having observed a date on the page bearing the signature of the notebook's owner. "He had some culinary interests, I see by these recipes. Here are some references, too, to a textbook he hoped to write, and a partial outline. Some addresses. Ah, here we are. Here at last is one complete poem. I'll just detach this sheet, if I may," said Pons, suiting his actions to his words, "and post it back to you when I've done with it."

Tooker's expression suggested that he was convinced by this time that my companion was little short of being a madman. Though he held his own counsel, his keen eyes gave him away. He shot a glance at me, he gazed hard at Pons, who now held Muir's notebook out to him, and then barely nodded to sanction Pons' removal of the sheet, which Pons had already unceremoniously folded and stuck into his pocket.

"And now, what next, Mr. Pons?" asked the solicitor, when he had restored the notebook to its niche. He spoke in a tone of voice which plainly indicated that he would not have been surprised at any wild request Pons might make, and I confess I shared something of his feelings, for Pons seemed bent upon anything but pursuit of a murderer.

"Nothing further, Mr. Tooker. You've been most forebearing and helpful."

"The ways of detectives are quite beyond a mere solicitor," said Tooker, not without an edge of sarcasm in his voice. "I hope I've helped you along the road to the identity of Mr. Bowne's murderer."

"Ah, I didn't come for that. I've been quite certain of his identity for some little time. No, I came in search of the final piece of this little puzzle, and I fancy I have it here." He touched his pocket.

We left a sadly baffled solicitor behind us, and, I fear, Pons rode back to Birdlip with an almost equally baffled companion at his

side, for Pons offered not one word of explanation.

Once back at the Royal George at a late luncheon, I could restrain myself no longer. "What did you mean, Pons, when you told Tooker you knew who Bowne's murderer was?"

"Perhaps I should have said that I am reasonably sure of his identity," replied Pons mildly. "The only pending problem would seem to be that of establishing sufficient legal evidence to convict him. But perhaps we'll be able to trap him. We shall see."

"You cannot mean it!" I cried.

Pons took from his pocket the sheet he had abstracted from Muir's notebook. "It should be as plain to you as it is to me, once you've read that, Parker, and considered it in the light of the known events of the matter," he said.

I read Muir's poem in silence—

The linnet starts from its nest
and goes high up into the west

against the thunder and the crag,
amid the haunts of fox and stag

to where the lightning-wounded
beech
points toward the channel's reach,

thence by a mile, and turns to face
to where the setting sun last lays
its golden grace.

"You will remember that I postulated the lines discovered in Bowne's mosaic cylinder were but part of a larger unit," said Pons. "Here at last we have that complete unit."

"I'm inclined to agree with our client that the whole is as bad, as poetry, as the part."

"It was hardly meant to be a poem except to those readers who were not intended to read it. It is a suitably constructed riddle."

"Have you solved it?" I asked bluntly.

"Not yet. But I fancy it is not insoluble. I submit, however, that, since Bowne's cylinder contained the first couplet, those owned by Hawes and Reed contained the next two, one in each. Muir alone held the last, without which the preceding three were useless. Does it not impress you as significant that Muir had left instructions for the final couplet to be mailed to his three students after his death?"

"He wanted each of them to have the means to solve the riddle," I said. "That is surely as plain as a pikestaff."

"Not each alone," said Pons, "but as a trio in place of the old quartet. None of the three could solve the riddle without the others. I put it to you, Parker, that the whole thing is now as clear as spring water."

"It is not to me."

"Think on it," said Pons.

"If you're so sure of the identity of the murderer, why not arrest him?" I demanded.

"I prefer to wait until he comes to me."

I stared at him, bereft of speech.

"In the meantime," he continued jauntily, "what do you say to a little tour of the Cotswolds? This afternoon, perhaps. Or tomorrow?"

I shook my head. "I can't stay away from my practice so long, Pons," I protested. "I must return to London."

"I'm sorry to hear it," said Pons. "Rejoin me when you can. I know how you like to be in on the conclusion of these little adventures you delight to chronicle." He stroked his lean nose reflectively with one forefinger and gazed calculatingly at the ceiling. "Shall we say not later than three days hence?"

On the morning of the third day after, I arrived at the Royal George to find not only Pons, but also Detective-Sergeant Burnham and our client waiting on my arrival.

"Ah, Parker, you're just in time for an excursion into the hills," cried Pons.

"After three hours on the Great Western, I'm in no mood for a hike," I answered.

"Come, come—the game's afoot. You wouldn't miss it if you were down with pneumonia." He drew a copy of the Cheltenham daily from his pocket and handed it to me. "You may not have seen this in the fastnesses of London."

The paper was dated two days before—the day after I had taken leave of Pons to return to London—and was folded to a box on the front page, where Cornelius Muir's poem was reproduced in boldface under a brief paragraph headed, "Archaeologist Was Secret Poet."

"I recognize your hand in this, Pons," I said.

"With the connivance of the police," replied Pons, with a bow toward Detective-Sergeant Burnham.

"Yes, Mr. Pons said it was necessary," explained the Sergeant, "so we had it put in all the papers—Cheltenham, Gloucester, Tewkesbury, Winchcombe, Cirencester, Stroud—the lot of 'em. I'm not much for poetry myself, but even I can see that Mr. Muir was a bird-lover. Lot of those folks hereabout."

"Let us be on our way," said Pons, glancing at his watch. "We have a short distance to go before we leave the car."

Birrell drove. We went in a northeasterly direction from Birdlip, deep into the hills. I soon lost track of our whereabouts, since I was not familiar with the region east of Cheltenham, but we drove for only a short distance before our client eased his car into an arbored lane where it would be unseen from the road. From this spot,

Pons led the way into the hills on foot. The May morning was wonderfully sweet with the perfume of spring flowers and the pungence of foliage, particularly strong after a light rainfall during the night, and the wood through which we walked was surely the most idyllic of that countryside.

We were ascending a rather barren slope when Pons paused suddenly and swept his arm dramatically upward. Before us lay a mounded hilltop, crowned by a rough circle of scrubby bushes.

"That, gentlemen," said Pons, "is known locally as the Linnet's Nest."

"I see," said our client keenly, "and I suppose, Mr. Pons, we go west from that point—'high up'?"

"We do, indeed. Yonder dark promontory is called Thunder Crag." We resumed walking as Pons spoke. "I had some difficulty finding 'the lightning-wounded beech', primarily because, in the interval of a decade and a half, nothing but the jagged stump of it was left. The channel of the 'channel's reach' is, of course, Bristol Channel, toward which evidence indicates that the beech once leaned."

Detective-Sergeant Burnham expressed his bewilderment. "I'm not sure I know what you two are talking about," he said.

"Sergeant, the couplet found in the sovereign box, which I showed you, was the beginning of a set of directions for reaching a certain place in the escarpment. Since this couplet was also the first couplet of the 'poem' written by the late Cornelius Muir, it is reasonable to assume that the poem constitutes the complete directions. Acting on that assumption, I found successively the places mentioned in the four couplets, and, at last, the goal which Muir sought to conceal from all but the three men who knew what to expect when they reached it."

Detective-Sergeant Burnham looked but little less bewildered; however, he did not press Pons further.

We had now passed the Linnet's Nest, and were advancing upon Thunder Crag, which had a forbidding aspect even in sunlight, and must certainly have worn a menacing appearance in heavy weather. Beyond it lay a little beech woods, then again open slopes, and there, standing alone on a little knoll, an ancient beech stump beside which, when he reached it, Pons came to a stop and pointed.

"Bristol Channel lies in that direction. From this place by a mile we shall see a high promontory facing westward—a place 'where the setting sun last lays its golden grace'. We have a mile to go."

We came at last to the west-facing cliff which was Pons' goal.

We had walked, I judged, close to five miles from the car, though we might have driven closer to the Linnet's Nest had not Pons deemed it inadvisable. The actual cliff face was not high up from where we stood near its base; it rose from the escarpment in an area that was singularly barren save for a growth of scrubby trees immediately at its base.

"These trees, I submit, were purposely planted," said Pons.

"In this desolate place?" cried Birrell. "Why?"

"Why—if not to conceal what lies behind them?"

"Earth and oolite, Mr. Pons?" asked Detective-Sergeant Burnham. "They have no value hereabout, sir."

"But what lies behind has value, Sergeant."

So saying, Pons descended to the base of the cliff, which lay at the bottom of a slight declivity, doubtless formed by erosion over many years. He parted the trees carefully and disclosed a spill of oolite and earth which had evidently been drawn back and away from the base.

"My work, gentlemen," he said curtly.

Before us was a break in the wall of stone; it had the appearance of having been brought about by erosion a long time ago. It might have seemed the entrance to a cave, were it not that the hard wall of stone that was the cliff could be plainly seen a little way in. Yet it was to this wall that Pons went without hesitation, beckoning us to follow.

As we pressed close, the apparently solid wall of stone opened inward. A cavern yawned beyond.

"Your lantern, Sergeant," said Pons, stepping to one side.

Detective-Sergeant Burnham flashed a light into the cavern, revealing scattered bones, and what appeared to be burial chambers in the walls of the cavern.

"A barrow!" exclaimed our client.

"This is more than an ordinary barrow," said Pons. "If you are thinking of such well-known barrows as Notgrove or Belas Knap or Uley Long Barrow—no, this is decidedly different. This was a burial place used exclusively by rulers of the Dobuni—quite apart from the customary artifacts to be expected here, there are jeweled pieces which have a value transcending what they would bring as antiquities. There were, I surmise, a great many more pieces. There are bronzes, pottery, flint weapons, and the usual crude primitive pieces, suggesting that this burial place was usurped for the Dobuni rulers from an earlier race. Moreover, there is nothing to show that the Romans ever found this place, for there are no Roman signs. It must indeed have seemed a treasure trove when Cornelius Muir stumbled upon it!

"But we have little time in which to explore it. We need not do so now. Unless I am very much mistaken, publication of Muir's 'poem' will certainly not have been missed by our quarry, who has been looking for it so actively, and he in turn will lose no time finding this place."

"Particularly," I could not help adding, "since Mr. Nosey Pons is also looking about."

Pons chuckled. "We shall wait for him here. It is now well into the afternoon, and I fancy he will wait only long enough to mark the sunlight's fall upon the stone above. We'd better leave the door a trifle ajar to prevent the air from going stale. Let us just make ourselves comfortable and bear in mind that silence is the rule."

We waited for an uncomfortable two hours before the sound of a rattling stone from outside gave warning of someone approaching. Even so, it took a while longer for our quarry to discover the door behind the grove of trees. But at last his scraping footsteps came nearer—then there was a tapping on the door, as with a hammer. Then the door swung open. A short, slender man stood there, silhouetted against the fading daylight behind him.

"Mr. Thomas Hawkins, I believe," said Pons, as Detective-Sergeant Burnham's lantern shot its light into our quarry's face.

Hawkins' response was a furious curse. Then he dodged back, crashed through the trees, and ran fleetly around the face of the cliff.

"After him!" shouted Detective-Sergeant Burnham.

We tumbled out of the cave, broke through the trees, and gave chase, our client in the lead.

Our pursuit, however, was not destined to last long. Hawkins was running in unfamiliar territory, and though he was nimble and artful, he came at last to the edge of a steep-walled coombe. Skirting it, with Birrell not far behind him, Hawkins' foot turned on a loose stone. With a wild cry of despair, Hawkins plunged over the edge.

When we reached the place where he had vanished, we looked over and saw him lying motionless below. And when at last we made our way to the spot, it was evident that his neck had been broken.

"I'm not yet quite clear about the details of the puzzle, Pons," I said, as we sat in our compartment riding through the night toward London a few hours later. "One or two little things escape me."

"Small wonder," said Pons handsomely. "The matter, though essentially elementary, had puzzling ramifications. We came to it by the side door, so to speak.

But it can be reconstructed quite simply.

"Muir stumbled upon this rich treasure some fifteen years ago. Needing help, he enlisted the aid of three of his former students, whom he knew well enough to know that he could trust them even to the extent of aiding him in a basically illegal act—though, as you know, raiding the ancient barrows was a popular pastime of the nineteenth century. He blindfolded them—you'll recall Reed's delirious mutterings—and took them to the place, which was evidently so filled with treasure that he could not remove it without assistance.

"The agreement among them was obviously to permit Muir to sell off the pieces as portions of his collection, which no one was likely to question, and to divide the proceeds, less duties, four ways. The figure Mr. Tooker quoted us in regard to his last sale, suggests as much, since it amounts approximately to four times the last payment Bowne received, less duties.

"At the same time, Muir agreed to reveal the location of the place to them all together when he died—he intended to will it to them, even though much of the treasure had been removed to his home. To do so, he devised the ingenious method of composing a series of couplets telling them where the barrow was, and enclosing one couplet in each cylinder he gave to his partners, with the provision that the final couplet be posted to each at his death, thus making it necessary for all three to meet in order to solve the riddle.

"What he failed to count on was that one of the three might divulge enough of the secret to endanger the success of the plan—and even their very lives. It was obviously Hawes who told his nephew. It was Hawes who died first following Muir's death. He died in a contrived accident. Hawkins admitted to knowing that his heart had been bad; he may have made earlier attempts to frighten him, of which we know nothing. Hawkins had no other motive but to disarm us when he made an attempt to throw us off in regard to the cylinder, and it was most certainly he who subsequently managed to slip a warning to us at the Royal George. It was a calculated touch to type the message to Bowne on Reed's typewriter when he broke into Reed's home.

"He came within one couplet and the last of learning the secret—he had his uncle's, he had stolen Reed's, and he murdered Bowne to steal his cylinder, knowing he would have it on his person when he left to keep the appointment Hawkins had made in Reed's name.

"An entertaining problem, Parker. Would there were more like it!"

nobody deserved justice

by . . . Rex Stout

She was foxy, he shouted. She was slick. What was the true story?

"CHRISTMAS EVE," Art Hipple was thinking to himself, "would be a good time for the murder."

The thought was both timely and characteristic. It was three o'clock in the afternoon of December 24th; and though the murder would have got an eager welcome from Art Hipple any day at all, his disdainful attitude toward the prolonged hurly-burly of Christmas sentiment and shopping made that the best possible date for it. He did not actually turn up his nose at Christmas, for that would have been un-American, but as a New York cop not yet out of his twenties who had recently been made a precinct dick and had hung his uniform in the back of the closet of his furnished room, it had to be made clear, especially to himself, that he was good and tough, and a cynical slant on Christmas was therefore imperative.

His hope of running across a murder had begun back in the days when his assignment had been tagging illegally parked cars, and was merely practical and professional. His dear ambition was

A Rex Stout short-short is so rare that we decided not *to wait until Christmas to bring you this little story, describing one man's Christmas Eve. Rex Stout, recent President of the Mystery Writers of America, is of course best known for his many novels about the incredible Nero Wolfe.*

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promotion to Homicide, and the shortest cut would have been discovery of a beaut. It had not gone so far as obsession; as he strode down the sidewalk this December afternoon he was not sniffing for the scent of blood at each dingy entrance he passed; but when he reached the number he had been given and turned to enter, his hand darted inside his jacket to touch his gun.

None of the three people he found in the cluttered and smelly little room one flight up seemed to need shooting. Art identified himself and got their names down. The man at the battered old desk, who was twice Art's age and needed a shave, was Emil Duross, proprietor of the business conducted in that room—Duross Specialties, mail-order dealer in gimcrack jewelry. The younger man, small, dark, and neat, seated on a chair squeezed in between the desk and shelves stacked with cardboard boxes, was H. E. Koenig, adjuster, according to a card he had proffered, for the Apex Insurance Company. The girl, who had pale watery eyes and a stringy neck, stood backed up to a pile of cartons the height of her shoulder. She had on a dark brown felt hat and a lighter brown woolen coat that had lost a button. Her name was Helen Lauro, and it could have been not rheum in her eyes but the remains of tears.

Because Art was thorough it took him twenty minutes to get the story to his satisfaction. Then he returned his notebook to his pocket, looked at Duross, at Koenig, and last at the girl. He wanted to tell her to wipe her eyes, but what if she didn't have a handkerchief?

He spoke to Duross. "Stop me if I'm wrong," he said. "You bought the ring a week ago to give to your wife for Christmas and paid sixty-two dollars for it. You put it there in a desk drawer after showing it to Miss Lauro?"

Duross turned his palms up. "Just a natural thing. She works for me, she's a woman, it's a beautiful ring."

"Okay. Today you work with her filling orders, addressing packages, and putting postage on. You send her to the post office with a bag of the packages. Why didn't she take all of them?"

"She did."

"Then what are those?" Art pointed to a pile of little boxes, addressed and stamped, on the end of the table.

"Orders that came in the afternoon mail. I did them while she was gone to the post office."

Art nodded. "And also while she was gone you looked in the drawer to get the ring to take it home for Christmas, and it wasn't there. You know it was there this morning because Miss Lauro asked if she could look at it again, and you showed it to her

and let her put it on her finger, and then you put it back in the drawer. But this afternoon it was gone, and you couldn't have taken it yourself because you haven't left this room. Miss Lauro went out and got sandwiches for your lunch. So you decided she took the ring, and you phoned the insurance company, and Mr. Koenig came and advised you to call the police, and you did so, and—"

"Only his stock is insured," Koenig put in. "The ring was not a stock item and was not covered."

"Just a legality," Duross declared scornfully. "Insurance companies can't hide behind legalities. It hurts their reputation."

Koenig smiled politely but noncommittally.

Art turned to the girl. "Why don't you sit down?" he asked her. "There's a chair we men are not using."

"I will never sit down in this room again," she declared in a thin tight voice.

"Okay." Art scowled at her. She was certainly not comely. "If you did take the ring you might—"

"I didn't!"

"Very well. But if you did you might as well tell me where it is because you won't ever dare to wear it or sell it."

"Of course I wouldn't. I knew I wouldn't. That's why I didn't take it."

"Oh? You thought of taking it?"

"Of course I did. It was a beautiful ring." She stopped to swallow. "Maybe my life isn't much, but what it is, I'd give it for a ring like that, and a girl like me, I could live a hundred years and I'll never have one. Of course I thought of taking it, but I knew I couldn't ever wear it."

"You see?" Duross appealed to the law. "She's foxy, that girl. She's slick."

Art downed an impulse to cut it short, get out, return to the station house, and write a report. Nobody here deserved anything, not even justice. Perhaps especially not justice. Writing a brief report was all it rated, and all, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, it would have got. But instead of breaking it off, Art sat and thought it over through a long silence, with the three pairs of eyes on him. Finally he spoke to Duross:

"Get me the orders that came in the afternoon mail."

Duross was startled. "Why?"

"I want to check them with that pile of boxes you addressed and stamped."

Duross shook his head. "I don't need a cop to check my orders and shipments. Is this a gag?"

"No. Get me the orders."

"I will not!"

"Then I'll have to open all the boxes." Art rose and headed for

the table. Duross bounced up and got in front of him and they were chest to chest.

"You don't touch those boxes," Duross told him. "You got no search warrant. You don't touch anything."

"That's just a legality." Art backed off a foot to avoid contact. "And since I guessed right, what's a little legality? I'm going to open the boxes here and now, but I'll count ten first to give you a chance to pick it out and hand it to me and save both of us a lot of bother. One, two, three—"

"I'll phone the station house!"

"Go ahead. Four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—" Art stopped at nine because Duross had moved to the table and was fingering the boxes. As he drew away with one in his hand Art commanded him: "Gimme." He hesitated but passed it over, and after a glance at the address Art ripped the tape off, opened the flap of the box, took out a wad of tissue paper, and then a ring box. From that he removed a ring, yellow gold, with a large greenish stone. Helen Lauro made a noise in her throat. Koenig let out a grunt, evidently meant for applause. Duross made a grab, not for the ring but for the box on which he had put an address, and missed.

"It stuck out as plain as your nose," Art told him, "but of course my going for the boxes was just a good guess. Did you pay sixty-two bucks for this?"

Duross's lips parted, but no words came. Apparently he had none. He nodded, not vigorously. Then he looked down at the floor.

Art turned to the girl. "Look, Miss Lauro. You say you're through here. You ought to have something to remember it by. You could make some trouble for Mr. Duross for the dirty trick he tried to play on you, and if you lay off I expect he'd like to show his appreciation by giving you this ring. Wouldn't you, Mr. Duross?"

Duross managed to get it out. "Sure I would."

"Shall I give it to her for you?"

"Sure." Duross's jaw worked. "Go ahead."

Art extended a hand with the ring and the girl took it, but not looking at it because she was gazing incredulously at him. It was a gaze so intense as to disconcert him, and he covered by turning to Duross and proffering the box with an address on it.

"Here," he said, "you can have it. Next time you cook up a plan for getting credit with your wife for buying her a ring, and collecting from the insurance company for its cost, and sending the ring to a girl friend, all in one little operation, don't do it. And don't forget you gave Miss Lauro that ring before witnesses."

Duross gulped and nodded.

Koenig spoke. "Your name is not Hipple, officer, it's Santa Claus. You have given her the ring she would have given her life for, you have given him an out on a charge of attempted fraud, and you have given me a crossoff on a claim. That's the ticket! That's the old yuletide spirit! Merry Christmas!"

"Nuts," Art said contemptuously, and turned and marched from the room, down the stairs, and out to the sidewalk. As he headed in the direction of the stationhouse he decided that he would tone it down a little in his report. Getting a name for being tough was okay, but not too damn tough. That insurance guy sure was dumb, calling him Santa Claus—him, Art Hipple, feeling as he did about Christmas.

Which reminded him, Christmas Eve would be a swell time for the murder.

CUSTOMS SCHOOL

NARCOTICS are found hidden in the plumbing fixtures of a cargo ship. A cache of gold is found in the rear fender of a tilting automobile. Watch movements are found secreted in pouches in a woman's black corset,—*and* in hollowed out boards, in a shipment of lumber.

What about the men who catch up with these smugglers? Whether veteran inspectors or rookie patrol officers they've probably all attended school recently (the older men for refresher courses), the only school of its kind in the world, the Port of New York Customs School where John T. Rasch, training officer in charge, and his instructors, teach the agency's 800 men who work New York's piers and airports, and students from other cities, what the Service knows about smugglers—pros *and* amateurs. Rasch works with a staff of three other training officers, each an expert, and calls on other inspectors to lecture on their experiences. It's obviously important to keep up with "the latest trends"...

Their school book is the Customs Manual, the department's "bible," which lists thousands of items and their duties, the items which have to be held for clearance and the items which can't be imported at all. The men are taught where to look for contraband—not only in hollow heels, cakes of soap, false bottom luggage and phony books, but also in wooden legs, stuffed animals, baby food, loaves of bread, etc., etc. Even in underwear.

And they are taught to ask—WHY....

Why did she put the luggage in a position which made it difficult to examine?

Why was he nervous?

Why did that tall woman wear shoes with thick soles?

And *why*—as we told above—did the car on the pier tilt backwards?

Why?

THE saint's RATINGS

Paperback Confidential—

the true facts are revealed now for the first time. Well concealed, in a top secret location, somewhere in New York City, is a gigantic machine. The operators of this device spin the handles, throw the switches, then press one of the buttons labeled "Murder," "Blackmail" and such. (Lately they have only been pressing the Bank Robbery and Kidnap buttons.) When functioning properly this machine disgorges a book a minute. Each one is complete with Hero, Killer, Fight and Bedroom Scene. Trained assistants put in grammatical errors and misspell words to give the correct literary touch; then assign an author's name to each book. The mss are sent to publishers on a first-come, first-served basis. There has been some difficulty in getting a truly uniform final product, since the covers on the published books vary slightly. This is being remedied by an attachment for the machine that will produce cover paintings in black and white, with areas outlined and numbered for the colors to be filled in. NOTE: *Anyone doubting this machine's existence will find the proof on the local bookstand.*

OUR RATING SYSTEM:

- Three haloes: Outstanding
- Two haloes: Above average
- One halo: Passable reading
- A pitchfork: For the ash can

RIDE THE NIGHTMARE, by Richard Matheson (Ballentine, 35¢)

The suspense is not as great as the cover leads you to believe, but it is still there. Smooth prose carries this story of a kidnapping along to a tense though predictable, end.

ASSIGNMENT—HELENE, by Edward S. Aarons (Gold Medal, 25¢)

The Sam Durell series has become as boring as the endless adventures of Andy Hardy. In spite of basically sound material and some high points of action, the story collapses completely and takes forever to end. Retire, Sam, and live on your past glories.

SO DEAD MY LOVELY, by Day Keene (Pyramid, 35¢)

So dead my attention. It is hard to understand why the intelligent prose of this book is wrapped around such a dull and leaden plot.

BRING ME ANOTHER CORPSE, by Peter Rabe (Gold Medal, 25¢)

No suggestions as to the obvious identity of the corpse, please! The custom of murdering authors went out of style with the Roman arena. Confusing story, dead as one of its own corpses.

THE MAN OF COLD RAGES, by Jordan Park (Pyramid, 35¢)

A money-back guarantee with this one would bankrupt the company.

THE TWISTED ONES, by Vin Packer (Gold Medal, 35¢)

Wish they had gone straight.

house of golden death

by . . . Sax Rohmer

It was her shriek that reached him, through the smoke. And the sight of the blood—dripping . . .

STOP when we pass the next lamp and give me a light for my pipe."

"Why?"

"No! don't look round," warned my companion. "I think someone is following us. And it is always advisable to be on guard in this neighborhood."

We had nearly reached the house in Wade Street, Limehouse, which my friend used as a base for East End operations. The night was dark but clear, and I thought that presently when dawn came it would bring a cold, bright morning. There was no moon, and as we passed the lamp and paused we stood in almost total darkness.

Facing in the direction of the Council School I struck a match. It revealed my ruffianly looking companion—in whom his nearest friends must have failed to recognize Mr. Paul Harley of Chancery Lane.

He was glancing furtively back along the street, and when a moment later we moved on, I, too, had detected the presence of a figure stumbling toward us.

Sax Rohmer who, admittedly, has made an enduring contribution to the mythos of our times with many of his novels has often, however, turned to different themes. Here is a story set in London's Limehouse, the same Limehouse he has written about so often—and yet so markedly different.

Originally published as THE HOUSE OF GOLDEN JOSS.
Copyright, 1920, by Sax Rohmer.
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"Don't stop at the door," whispered Harley, for our follower was only a few yards away.

Accordingly we passed the house in which Harley had rooms, and had proceeded some fifteen paces farther when the man who was following us stumbled in between Harley and myself, clutching an arm of either. I scarcely knew what to expect, but was prepared for anything, when:

"Mates!" said a man huskily. "Mates, if you know where I can get a drink, take me there!"

Harley laughed shortly. I cannot say if he remained suspicious of the newcomer, but for my own part I had determined after one glance at the man that he was merely a drunken fireman newly recovered from a prolonged debauch.

"Where 'ave yer been, old son?" growled Harley, in that wonderful dialect of his which I had so often and so vainly sought to cultivate. "You look as though you'd 'ad one too many already."

"I ain't," declared the fireman, who appeared to be in a semi-dazed condition. "I ain't 'ad one since ten o'clock last night. It's dope wot's got me, mates, not rum."

"Dope!" said Harley sharply; "been 'avin' a pipe, eh?"

"If you've got a corpse-reviver anywhere," continued the man in that curious, husky voice, "'ave pity on me, mate. I seen a thing tonight wot give me the jim-jams."

"All right, old son," said my friend good-humouredly; "about turn! I've got a drop in the bottle, but me an' my mate sails tomorrow, an' it's the last."

"Gawd bless yer!" growled the fireman; and the three of us —an odd trio, truly—turned about, retracing our steps.

As we approached the street lamp and its light shone upon the haggard face of the man walking between us, Harley stopped, and:

"Wot's up with yer eye?" he inquired.

He suddenly tilted the man's head upward and peered closely into one of his eyes. I suppressed a gasp of surprise for I instantly recognized the fireman of the *Jupiter!*

"Nothin' up with it, is there?" said the fireman.

"Only a lump o' mud," growled Harley, and with a very dirty handkerchief he pretended to remove the imaginary stain, and then, turning to me:

"Open the door, Jim," he directed.

His examination of the man's eyes had evidently satisfied him that our acquaintance had really been smoking opium.

We paused immediately outside the house for which we had been bound, and as I had the key I opened the door and the three of us stepped into a little dark room. Harley closed the door and

we stumbled upstairs to a low first-floor apartment facing the street. There was nothing in its appointments, as revealed in the light of an oil lamp burning on the solitary table, to distinguish it from a thousand other such apartments which may be leased for a few shillings a week in the neighbourhood. That adjoining might have told a different story, for it more closely resembled an actor's dressing-room than a seaman's lodging; but the door of this sanctum was kept scrupulously locked.

"Sit down, old son," said my friend heartily, pushing forward an old armchair. "Fetch out the grog, Jim; there's about enough for three."

I walked to a cupboard, as the fireman sank limply down in the chair, and took out a bottle and three glasses. When the man, who, as I could now see quite plainly, was suffering from the after effects of opium, had eagerly gulped the stiff drink which I handed to him, he looked around with dim, glazed eyes, and:

"You've saved my life, mates," he declared. "I've 'ad a 'orrible nightmare, I 'ave—a nightmare. See?"

He fixed his eyes on me for a moment, then raised himself from his seat, peering narrowly at me across the table.

"I seed you before, mate. Gaw, blimey! if you ain't the bloke wot I giv'd the pigtail to! And wot laid out that blasted Chink as was scraggin' me! Shake, mate!"

I shook hands with him, Harley eyeing me closely the while, in a manner which told me that his quick brain had already supplied the link connecting our doped acquaintance with my strange experience during his absence. At the same time it occurred to me that my fireman friend did not know that Ah Fu was dead, or he would never have broached the subject so openly.

"That's so," I said, and wondered if he required further information.

"It's all right, mate. I don't want to 'ear no more about blinking pigtails—not all my life I don't," and he sat back heavily in his chair and stared at Harley.

"Where have you been?" inquired Harley, as if no interruption had occurred, and then began to reload his pipe: "at Malay Jack's or at Number Fourteen?"

"Neither of 'em!" cried the fireman, some evidence of animation appearing in his face; "I been at Kwen Lung's."

"In Pennyfields?"

"That's 'im, the old bloke with the big joss. I allers goes to see Ma Lorenzo when I'm in Port o' London. I've seen 'er for the last time, mates."

He banged a big and dirty hand upon the table.

"Last night I see murder done, an' only that I know they wouldn't believe me, I'd walk

across to Limehouse P'lice Station presently and put the splits on 'em, I would."

Harley, who was seated behind the speaker, glanced at me significantly.

"Sure you wasn't dreamin'?" he inquired facetiously.

"Dreamin'!" cried the man. "Dreams don't leave no blood be'ind, do they?"

"Blood!" I exclaimed.

"That's wot I said—blood! When I woke up this mornin' there was blood all on thet grinnin' joss—the blood wot 'ad dripped from 'er shoulders when she fell."

"Eh!" said Harley. "Blood on whose shoulders? Wot the 'ell are you talkin' about, old son?"

" 'Ere"—the fireman turned in his chair and grasped Harley by the arm—"listen to me, and I'll tell you somethink, I will. I'm goin' in the *Seahawk* in the mornin', see? But if you want to know somethink, I'll tell yer. Drunk or sober I bars the blasted p'lice, but if you like to tell 'em I'll put you on somethink worth tellin'. Sure the bottle's empty, mates?"

I caught Harley's glance and divided the remainder of the whiskey evenly between the three glasses.

"Good 'ealth," said the fireman, and disposed of his share at a draught. "That's bucked me up wonderful."

He lay back in his chair and from a little tobacco-box began to fill a short clay pipe.

"Look 'ere, mates, I'm soberin' up, like, after the smoke, an' I can see, I can see plain, as nobody'll ever believe me. Nobody ever does, worse luck, but 'ere goes. Pass the matches."

He lighted his pipe, and looking about him in a sort of vaguely aggressive way:

"Last night," he resumed, "after I was chucked out of the Dock Gates, I made up my mind to go and smoke a pipe with old Ma Lorenzo. Round I goes to Pennyfields, and she don't seem glad to see me. There's nobody there only me. Not like the old days when you 'ad to book your seat in advance."

He laughed gruffly.

"She didn't want to let me in at first, said they was watched, that if a Chink 'ad an old pipe wot 'ad b'longed to 'is grandfather it was good enough to get 'im fined fifty quid. Anyway, me bein' an old friend she spread a mat for me and filled me a pipe. I asked after old Kwen Lung, but, of course, 'e was out gamblin', as usual; so after old Ma Lorenzo 'ad made me comfortable an' gone out I 'ad the place to myself, and presently I dozed off and forgot all about bloody ship's bunkers an' drivin' Scotchmen."

He paused and looked about him defiantly.

"I dunno 'ow long I slept," he continued, "but some time in

the night I kind of 'alf woke up."

At that he twisted violently in his chair and glared across at Harley:

"You been a pal to me," he said; "but tell me I was dreamin' again and I'll smash yer bloody face!"

He glared for a while, then addressing his narrative more particularly to me, he resumed:

"It was a scream wot woke me —a woman's scream. I didn't sit up; I couldn't. I never felt like it before. It was the same as bein' buried alive, I should think. I could see 'an I could 'ear, but I couldn't move one muscle in my body. Foller me? An' wot did I see, mates, an' wot did I 'ear? I'm goin' to tell yer. I see old Kwen Lung's daughter—"

"I didn't know 'e 'ad one," murmured Harley.

"Then you don't know much!" shouted the fireman. "I knew years ago, but 'e kept 'er stowed away somewhere up above, an' last night was the first time I ever see 'er. It was 'er shriek wot 'ad reached me, reached me through the smoke. I don't take much stock in Chink gals in general, but this one's mother was no Chink, I'll swear. She was just as pretty as a bloomin' ivory doll, an' as little an' as white, and that old swine Kwen Lung 'ad tore the dress off of 'er shoulders with a bloody great whip!"

Harley was leaning forward in his seat now, intent upon the man's story, and although I could not get rid of the idea that our friend was relating the events of a particularly unpleasant opium dream, nevertheless, I was fascinated by the strange story and by the strange manner of its telling.

"I saw the blood drip from 'er bare shoulders, mates," the man continued huskily, and with his big dirty hands he strove to illustrate his words. "An' that old yellow devil lashed an' lashed until the poor gal was past screamin'. She just sank down on the floor all of a 'eap, moanin' and moanin'—Gawd! I can 'ear 'er moanin' now!

"Meanwhile, 'ere's me with murder in me 'eart lyin' there watchin', an' I can't speak, no! I can't even curse the yellow rat, an' I can't move—not a 'and, not a foot! Just as she fell there right up against the joss an' 'er blood trickled down on 'is gilded feet, old Ma Lorenzo comes staggerin' in. I remember all this as clear as print, mates, remember it plain, but wot 'appened next ain't so good an' clear. Somethink seemed to bust in me 'ead. Only just before I went off, the winder—there's only one in the room—was smashed to smithereens an' somebody come in through it."

"Are you sure?" said Harley eagerly. "Are you sure?"

That he was intensely absorbed in the story he revealed by a piece of bad artistry, very rare in him. He temporarily forgot his dialect.

Our marine friend, however, was too much taken up with his own story to notice the slip, and:

"Dead sure!" he shouted.

He suddenly twisted around in his chair.

"Tell me I was dreamin', mate," he invited, "and if *you* ain't dreamin' in 'arf a tick it won't be because I 'aven't put yer to sleep!"

"I ain't arguin', old son," said Harley soothingly. "Get on with your yarn."

"Ho!" said the fireman, mollified, "so long as you ain't. Well, then, it's all blotted out after that. Somebody come in at the winder, but 'oo it was or wot it was I can't tell yer, not for fifty quid. When I woke up, which is about 'arf an hour before you see me, I'm all alone—see? There's no sign of Kwen Lung nor the gal nor old Ma Lorenzo nor anybody. I sez to meself, wot you keep on sayin'. I sez, 'You're dreamin', Bill.' "

"But I don't think you was," declared Harley. "Straight I don't!"

"I know I wasn't!" roared the fireman, and banged the table lustily. "I see 'er blood on the joss an' on the floor where she lay!"

"This morning?" I interjected.

"This mornin', in the light of the little oil lamp where old Ma Lorenzo 'ad roasted the pills! It's all still an' quiet an' I feel more dead than alive. I'm goin' to give 'er a hail, see? When I sez to myself, 'Bill,' I sez, 'put out to sea; you're amongst Kaffirs, Bill.' It occurred to me as old Kwen Lung might wonder 'ow much I knew. So I beat it. But when I got in the open air I felt I'd never make my lodgin's without a tonic. That's 'ow I come to meet you, mates.

"Listen—I'm away in the old *Seahawk* in the mornin', but I'll tell you somethink. That yellow bastard killed his daughter last night! Beat 'er to death. I seen it plain. The sweetest, prettiest bit of ivory as Gawd ever put breath into. If 'er body ain't in the river, it's in the 'ouse. Drunk or sober, I never could stand the splits, but mates"—he stood up, and grasping me by the arm, he drew me across the room where he also seized Harley in his muscular grip—"mates," he went on earnestly, "she was the sweetest, prettiest little gal as a man ever clapped eyes on. One of yer walk into Limehouse Station an' put the koppers wise. I'd sleep easier at sea if I knew old Kwen Lung 'ad gone west on a bloody rope's end."

For fully ten minutes after the fireman had departed Paul Harley sat staring abstractedly in front of him, his cold pipe between his teeth; and knowing his moods I intruded no words upon this reverie, until:

"Come on, Knox," he said,

standing up suddenly. "I think this matter calls for speedy action."

"What! Do you think the man's story was true?"

"I think nothing. I am going to look at Kwen Lung's joss."

Without another word he led the way downstairs and out into the deserted street. The first gray halftones of dawn were creeping into the sky, so that the outlines of Limehouse loomed like dim silhouettes about us. There was abundant evidence in the form of noises, strange and discordant, that many workers were busy on dock and riverside, but the streets through which our course lay were almost empty. Sometimes a furtive shadow would move out of some black gully and fade into a dimly seen doorway in a manner peculiarly unpleasant and Asiatic. But we met no palpable pedestrian throughout the journey.

Before the door of a house in Pennyfields which closely resembled that which we had left in Wade Street, in that it was flatly uninteresting, dirty and commonplace, we paused. There was no sign of life about the place and no lights showed at any of the windows, which appeared as dim cavities—eyeless sockets in the gray face of the building, as dawn proclaimed the birth of a new day.

Harley seized the knocker and knocked sharply. There was no response, and he repeated the summons, but again without effect. Thereupon, with a muttered exclamation, he grasped the knocker a third time and executed a veritable tattoo upon the door. When this had proceeded for about half a minute or more:

"All right, all right!" came a shaky voice from within. "I'm coming."

Harley released the knocker, and, turning to me:

"Ma Lorenzo," he whispered. "Don't make any mistakes."

Indeed, even as he warned me, heralded by a creaking of bolts and the rattling of a chain, the door was opened by a fat, shapeless, half-caste woman of indefinite age; in whose dark eyes, now sunken in bloated cheeks, in whose full though drooping lips, and even in the whole overlaid contour of whose face and figure it was possible to recognize the traces of former beauty. This was Ma Lorenzo, who for many years had lived at that address with old Kwen Lung, of whom strange stories were told in Chinatown.

As Bill Jones, A.B., my friend, Paul Harley, was well-known to Ma Lorenzo as he was well known to many others in that strange colony which clusters round the London docks. I sometimes enjoyed the privilege of accompanying my friend on a tour of investigation through the weird resorts which abound in that neighbourhood, and, indeed, we had been returning from one

of these Baghdad nights when our present adventure had been thrust upon us. Assuming a wild and boisterous manner which he had at command:

" 'Urry up, Ma!" said Harley, entering without ceremony; "I want to introduce my pal Jim 'ere to old Kwen Lung, and make it all right for him before I sail."

Ma Lorenzo, who was half-Portuguese, replied in her peculiar accent:

"This is no time to come waking me up out of bed!"

But Harley, brushing past her, was already inside the stuffy little room, and I hastened to follow.

"Kwen Lung!" shouted my friend loudly. "Where are you? Brought a friend to see you."

"Kwen Lung no hab," came the complaining tones of Ma Lorenzo from behind us.

It was curious to note how long association with the Chinese had resulted in her catching the infection of that pidgin-English which is a sort of esperanto in all Asiatic quarters.

"Eh!" cried my friend, pushing open a door on the right of the passage and stumbling down three worn steps into a very evil-smelling room. "Where is he?"

"Go play *fan-tan*. Not come back."

Ma Lorenzo, having relocked the street door, had rejoined us, and as I followed my friend down into the dim and uninviting apartment she stood at the top of the steps, hands on hips, regarding us.

The place, which was quite palpably an opium den, must have disappointed anyone familiar with the more ornate houses of Chinese vice in San Francisco and elsewhere. The bare floor was not particularly clean, and the few decorations which the room boasted were garishly European for the most part. A deep divan, evidently used sometimes as a bed, occupied one side of the room, and just to the left of the steps reposed the only typically Oriental object in the place.

It was a strange thing to see in so sordid a setting; a great gilded joss, more than life-size, squatting, hideous, upon a massive pedestal; a figure fit for some native temple but strangely out of place in that dirty little Limehouse abode.

I had never before visited Kwen Lung's, but the fame of his golden joss had reached me, and I know that he had received many offers for it, all of which he had rejected. It was whispered that Kwen Lung was rich, that he was a great man among the Chinese, and even that some kind of religious ceremony periodically took place in his house. Now, as I stood staring at the famous idol, I saw something which made me stare harder than ever.

The place was lighted by a hanging lamp from which depended bits of coloured paper

and several gilded silk tassels; but dim as the light was it could not conceal those tell-tale stains.

There was blood on the feet of the golden idol!

All this I detected at a glance, but ere I had time to speak:

"You can't tell me that tale, Ma!" cried Harley. "I believe 'e was smokin' in 'ere when we knocked."

The woman shrugged her fat shoulders.

"No, hab," she repeated. "You two johnnies clear out. Let me sleep."

But as I turned to her, beneath the nonchalant manner I could detect a great uneasiness; and in her dark eyes there was fear. That Harley also had seen the blood-stains I was well aware, and I did not doubt that furthermore he had noted the fact that the only mat which the room boasted had been placed before the joss—doubtless to hide other stains upon the boards.

As we stood so I presently became aware of a current of air passing across the room in the direction of the open door. It came from a window before which a tawdry red curtain had been draped. Either the window behind the curtain was wide open, which is alien to Chinese habits, or it was shattered. While I was wondering if Harley intended to investigate further:

"Come on, Jim!" he cried boisterously, and clapped me on the shoulder; "the old fox don't want to be disturbed."

He turned to the woman:

"Tell him when he wakes up, Ma," he said, "that if ever my pal Jim wants a pipe he's to 'ave one. Savvy? Jim's square."

"Savvy," replied the woman, and she was wholly unable to conceal her relief. "You clear out now, and I tell Kwen Lung when he come in."

"Righto, Ma!" said Harley. "Kiss 'im on both cheeks for me, an' tell 'im I'll be 'ome again in a month."

Grasping me by the arm he lurched up the steps, and the two of us presently found ourselves out in the street again. In the growing light the squalor of the district was more evident than ever, but the comparative freshness of the air was welcome after the reek of that room in which the golden idol sat leering, with blood at his feet.

"You saw, Harley?" I exclaimed excitedly. "You saw the stains? And I'm certain the window was broken!"

Harley nodded shortly.

"Back to Wade Street!" he said. "I allow myself fifteen minutes to shed Bill Jones, able seaman, and to become Paul Harley, of Chancery Lane."

As we hurried along:

"What steps shall you take?" I asked.

"First step: search Kwen Lung's house from cellar to roof.

Second step: entirely dependent upon result of first. The Chinese are subtle, Knox. If Kwen Lung has killed his daughter, it may require all the resources of Scotland Yard to prove it."

"But—"

"There is no 'but' about it. Chinatown is the one district of London which possesses the property of swallowing people up."

Half an hour later, as I sat in the inner room before the great dressing-table laboriously removing my disguise—for I was utterly incapable of metamorphosing myself like Harley in seven minutes—I heard a rapping at the outer door. I glanced nervously at my face in the mirror.

Comparatively little of "Jim" had yet been removed, for since time was precious to my friend I had acted as his dresser before setting to work to remove my own make-up. There were two entrances to the establishment, by one of which Paul Harley invariably entered and invariably went out, and from the other of which "Bill Jones" was sometimes seen to emerge, but never Paul Harley. That my friend had made good his retirement I knew, but, nevertheless, if I had to open the door of the outer room it must be as "Jim."

Thinking it impolite not to do so, since the one who knocked might be aware that we had come in but not gone out again, I hastily readjusted that side of my moustache which I had begun to remove, replaced my cap and muffler, and carefully locking the door of the dressing-room, crossed the outer apartment and opened the door.

It was Harley's custom never to enter or leave these rooms except under the mantle of friendly night, but at so early an hour I confess I had not expected a visitor. Wondering whom I should find there I opened the door.

Standing on the landing was a fellow-lodger who permanently occupied the two top rooms of the house. Paul Harley had taken the trouble to investigate the man's past, for "Captain Dan," the name by which he was known in the saloons and worse resorts which he frequented, was palpably a broken-down gentleman; a piece of flotsam caught in the yellow stream. Opium had been his downfall. How he lived I never knew, but Harley believed he had some small but settled income, sufficient to enable him to kill himself in comfort with the black pills.

As he stood there before me in the early morning light, I was aware of some subtle change in his appearance. It was fully six months since I had seen him last, but in some vague way he looked younger. Haggard he was, with an ugly cut showing on his temple, but not so lined as I remem-

bered him. Some former man seemed to be struggling through the opium-scarred surface. His eyes were brighter, and I noted with surprise that he wore decent clothes and was clean shaved.

"Good morning, Jim," he said; "you remember me, don't you?"

As he spoke I observed, too, that his manner had altered. He who had consorted with the sweepings of the doss-houses now addressed me as a courteous gentleman addresses an inferior—not haughtily or patronizingly, but with a note of conscious superiority and self-respect wholly unfamiliar. Almost it threw me off my guard, but remembering in the nick of time that I was still "Jim":

"Of course, I remember you, Cap'n," I said. "Step inside."

"Thanks," he replied, and followed me into the little room.

I placed for him the armchair which our friend the fireman had so recently occupied, but:

"I won't sit down," he said.

And now I observed that he was evidently in a condition of repressed excitement. Perhaps he saw the curiosity in my glance, for he suddenly rested both his hands on my shoulders, and:

"Yes, I have given up the dope, Jim," he said—"done with it forever. There's not a soul in this neighbourhood I can trust, yet if ever a man wanted a pal, I want one today. Now, you're square, my lad. I always knew that, in spite of the dope; and if I ask you to do a little thing that means a lot to me, I think you will do it. Am I right?"

"If it can be done, I'll do it," said I.

"Then, listen. I'm leaving England in the *Patna* for Singapore. She sails at noon tomorrow, and passengers go on board at ten o'clock. I've got my ticket, papers in order, but"—he paused impressively, grasping my shoulders hard—"I must get on board *tonight.*"

I stared him in the face.

"Why?" I asked.

He returned my look with one searching and eager; then:

"If I show you the reason," said he, "and trust you with all my papers, will you go down to the dock—it's no great distance—and ask to see Marryat, the chief officer? Perhaps you've sailed with him?"

"No," I replied guardedly. "I was never in the *Patna.*"

"Never mind. When you give him a letter which I shall write he will make the necessary arrangements for me to occupy my stateroom tonight. I knew him well," he explained, "in—the old days. Will you do it, Jim?"

"I'll do it with pleasure," I answered.

"Shake!" said Captain Dan.

We shook hands heartily, and:

"Now I'll show you the rea-

son," he added. "Come upstairs."

Turning, he led the way upstairs to his own room, and wondering greatly, I followed him in. Never having been in Captain Dan's apartments I cannot say whether they, like their occupant, had changed for the better. But I found myself in a room surprisingly clean and with a note of culture in its appointments which was even more surprising.

On a couch by the window, wrapped in a fur rug, lay the prettiest half-caste girl I had ever seen, East or West. Her skin was like cream rose petals and her abundant hair was of wonderful lustrous black. Perhaps it was her smooth warm colour which suggested the idea, but as her cheeks flushed at sight of Captain Dan and the long dark eyes lighted up in welcome, I thought of a delicate painting on ivory and I wondered more and more what it all could mean.

"I have brought Jim to see you," said Captain Dan. "No, don't trouble to move, dear."

But even before he had spoken I had seen the girl wince with pain as she had endeavored to sit up to greet us. She lay on her side in a rather constrained attitude, but although her sudden movement had brought tears to her eyes she smiled bravely and extended a tiny ivory hand to me.

"This is my wife, Jim!" said Captain Dan.

I could find no words at all, but merely stood there looking very awkward and feeling almost awed by the indescribable expression of trust in the eyes of the little Eurasian, as with her tiny fingers hidden in her husband's clasp she lay looking up at him.

"Now you know, Jim," said he, "why we must get aboard the *Patna* tonight. My wife is really too ill to travel; in fact, I shall have to carry her down to the cab, and such a proceeding in daylight would attract an enormous crowd in this neighbourhood!"

"Give me the letters and the papers," I answered. "I will start now."

His wife disengaged her hand and extended it to me.

"Thank you," she said, in a queer little silver-bell voice; "you are good. I shall always love you."

It must have been about eleven o'clock that night when Paul Harley rang me up. Since we had parted in the early morning I had had no word from him, and I was all anxiety to tell him of the quaint little romance which unknown to us had had its setting in the room above.

In accordance with my promise I had seen the chief officer of the *Patna;* and from the start of surprise which he gave on opening "Captain Dan's" letter, I judged that Mr. Marryat and the man who for so long had sunk to the lowest rung of the ladder had

been close friends in their "old days." At any rate, he had proceeded to make the necessary arrangements without a moment's delay, and the couple were to go on board the *Patna* at nine o'clock.

It was with a sense of having done at least one good deed that I finally quitted our Limehouse base and returned to my rooms. Now, at eleven o'clock at night:

"Can you come round to Chancery Lane at once?" said Harley. "I want you to run down to Pennyfields with me."

"Some development in the Kwen Lung business?"

"Hardly a development, but I'm not satisfied, Knox. I hate to be beaten."

Twenty minutes later I was sitting in Harley's study, watching him restlessly promenading up and down before the fire.

"The police searched Kwen Lung's place from foundation to tiles," he said. "I was there myself. Old Kwen Lung conveniently kept out of his way—still playing *fan-tan,* no doubt! But Ma Lorenzo was in evidence. She blandly declared that Kwen Lung never had a daughter! And in the absence of our friend the fireman, who sailed in the *Seahawk,* and whose evidence, by the way, is legally valueless—what could we do? They could find nobody in the neighbourhood prepared to state that Kwen Lung had a daughter or that Kwen Lung had no daughter. There are all sorts of fables about the old fox, but the facts about him are harder to get at."

"But," I went on to explain, "the bloodstains on the joss!"

"Ma Lorenzo stumbled and fell there on the previous night, striking her skull against the foot of the figure."

"What nonsense!" I cried. "We should have seen the wound last night."

"We might have done," said Harley musingly; "I don't know when she inflicted it on herself; but I *did* see it this morning."

"What!"

"Oh, the gash is there all right, partly covered by her hair."

He stood still, staring at me oddly.

"One meets with cases of singular devotion in unexpected quarters sometimes," he said.

"You mean that the woman inflicted the wound upon herself in order—"

"To save old Kwen Lung—exactly! It's marvellous."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "And the window?"

"Oh! it was broken right enough—by two drunken sailormen fighting in the court outside! Sash and everything smashed to splinters."

He began irritably to pace the carpet again.

"It must have been a devil of a fight!" he added savagely.

"Meanwhile," said I, "where is old Kwen Lung hiding?"

"But more particularly," cried Harley, "where has he hidden the poor victim? Come along, Knox! I'm going down there for a final look round."

"Of course, the premises are being watched?"

"Of course—and also, of course, I shall be the laughing stock of Scotland Yard if nothing results."

It was close on midnight when once more I found myself in Pennyfields. Carried away by Harley's irritable excitement I had quite forgotten the romance of Captain Dan; and when, having exchanged greetings with the detective on duty hard by the house of Kwen Lung, we presently found ourselves in the presence of Ma Lorenzo, I scarcely knew for a moment if I were "Jim" or my proper self.

"Is Kwen Lung in?" asked Harley sternly.

The woman shook her head.

"No," she replied; "he sometimes stop away a whole week"

"Does he?" jerked Harley. "Come in, Knox; we'll take another look round."

A moment later I found myself again in the room of the golden joss. The red curtain had been removed from before the shattered window, but otherwise the place looked exactly as it had looked before. The atmosphere was much less stale, however, but there was something repellent about the great gilded idol smiling eternally from his pedestal beside the door.

I stared into the leering face, and it was the face of one who knew and who might have said: "Yes! this and other things equally strange have I beheld in many lands as well as England. Much I could tell. Many things grim and terrible, and some few joyous; for behold! I smile but am silent."

For a while Harley stared abstractedly at the bloodstains on the pedestal of the joss and upon the floor beneath from which the matting had been pulled back. Suddenly he turned to Ma Lorenzo:

"Where have you hidden the body?" he demanded.

Watching her, I thought I saw the woman flinch, but there was enough of the Oriental in her composition to save her from self-betrayal. She shook her head slowly, watching Harley through half-closed eyes.

"Nobody hab," she replied.

And I thought for once that her lapse into pidgin had been deliberate and not accidental.

When finally we quitted the house of the missing Kwen Lung, and when, Harley having curtly acknowledged "good night" from the detective on duty, we came out into Limehouse Causeway.

"You have not overlooked the possibility, Harley," I said, "that

this woman's explanation may be true, and that the fireman of the *Seahawk* may have been entertaining us with an account of a weird dream?"

"No!" snapped Harley — "neither will Scotland Yard overlook it."

He was in a particularly impossible mood, for he so rarely made mistakes that to be detected in one invariably brought out those petulant traits of character which may have been due in some measure to long residence in the East. Recognizing that he would rather be alone I parted from him at the corner of Chancery Lane and returned to my own chambers. Furthermore, I was very tired, for it was close upon two o'clock, and on turning in I very promptly went to sleep, nor did I awaken until late in the morning.

For some odd reason, but possibly because the fact had occurred to me just as I was retiring, I remembered at the moment of waking that I had not told Harley about the romantic wedding of Captain Dan. As I had left my friend in very ill humour I thought that this would be a good excuse for an early call, and just before eleven o'clock I walked into his office. Innes, his invaluable secretary, showed me into the study at the back.

"Hallo, Knox," said Harley, looking up from a little silver Buddha which he was examining, "have you come to ask for news of the Kwen Lung case?"

"No," I replied. "Is there any?"

Harley shook his head.

"It seems like fate," he declared, "that this thing should have been sent to me this morning." He indicated the silver Buddha. "A present from a friend who knows my weakness for Chinese ornaments," he explained grimly. "It reminds me of that damned joss of Kwen Lung's!"

I took up the little image and examined it with interest. It was most beautifully fashioned in the patient Oriental way, and there was a little hinged door in the back which fitted so perfectly that when closed it was quite impossible to detect its presence. I glanced at Harley.

"I suppose you didn't find a jewel inside?" I said lightly.

"No," he replied; "there was nothing inside."

But even as he uttered the words his whole expression changed, and so suddenly as to startle me. He sprang up from the table, and:

"Have you an hour to spare, Knox?" he cried excitedly.

"I can spare an hour, but what for?"

"For Kwen Lung!"

Four minutes later we were speeding in the direction of Limehouse, and not a word of explanation to account for this

sudden journey could I extract from my friend. Therefore, I beguiled the time by telling him of my adventure with Captain Dan.

Harley listened to the story in unbroken silence, but at its termination he brought his hand down sharply on my knee.

"I have been almost perfectly blind, Knox," he said; "but not quite so perfectly blind as you!"

I stared at him in amazement, but he merely laughed and offered no explanation of his words.

Presently, then, I found myself yet again in the familiar room of the golden joss. Ma Lorenzo, in whom some hidden anxiety seemed to have increased since I had last seen her, stood at the top of the stairs watching us. Upon what idea my friend was operating and what he intended to do I could not imagine; but without a word to the woman he crossed the room and grasping the great golden idol with both arms he dragged it forward across the floor!

As he did so there was a stifled shriek, and Ma Lorenzo, stumbling down the steps, threw herself on her knees before Harley! Raising imploring hands:

"No, no!" she moaned. "Not until I tell you—I tell you everything first!"

"To begin with, tell me how to open this thing," he said sternly.

Momentarily she hesitated, and did not rise from her knees, but:

"Do you hear me?" he cried.

The woman rose unsteadily and walking slowly round the joss manipulated some hidden fastening, whereupon the entire back of the thing opened like a door! From what was within she shudderingly averted her face, but Harley, stepping back against the wall, stopped and peered into the cavity.

"Good God!" he muttered. "Come and look, Knox."

Prepared by his manner for some gruesome spectacle, I obeyed—and from that which I saw I recoiled in horror.

"Harley," I whispered, "Harley! who is it?"

The spectacle had truly sickened me. Crouched within the narrow space enclosed by the figure of the idol was the body of an old and wrinkled Chinese. His knees were drawn up to his chin, and his head so compressed upon them that little of his features could be seen.

"It is Kwen Lung!" murmured Ma Lorenzo, standing with clasped hands and wild eyes over by the window. "Kwen Lung—and I am glad he is dead!"

Such a note of hatred came into her voice as I had never heard in the voice of any woman.

"He is vile, a demon, a mocking cruel demon! Long, long years ago I would have killed him, but always I was afraid. I

tell you everything, everything. This is how he comes to be dead. The little one"—again her voice changed and a note of almost grotesque tenderness came into it—"the lotus-flower, that is his own daughter's child, flesh of his flesh, he keeps a prisoner as the women of China are kept, up there"—she raised one fat finger aloft—"up above. He does not know that someone comes to see her—someone who used to come to smoke but who gave it up because he had looked into the dear one's eyes. He does not know that she goes with me to see her man. Ah! we *think* he does not know! I—I arrange it all. A week ago they were married. On Tuesday night, when Kwen Lung die, I plan for her to steal away for ever, for ever."

Tears now were running down the woman's fat cheeks, and her voice quivered emotionally.

"For me it is the end, but for her it is the beginning of life. All right! I don't matter a damn! She is young and beautiful. Ah, God! so beautiful! A drunken pig comes here and finds his way in, so I give him the smoke and presently he sleeps, but it makes delay, and I don't know how soon Kwen Lung, that yellow demon, will wake. For he is like the bats who sleep all day and wake at night.

"At last the sailor pig sleeps and I call softly to my dear little one that the time has come. I have gone out into the street, locking the door behind me, to see if her man is waiting, and I hear her shrieks—her shrieks! I hurry back. My hands tremble so much that I can scarcely unlock the door. At last I enter, and I see and I know—that yellow devil has learned all and has been playing with us like cat and mouse! He is lashing her, with a great whip! Lashing her—that tiny, sweet flower. Ah!"

She choked in her utterance, and turning to the gilded joss which contained the dead man she shook her clenched hands at it, and the expression on her face I can never forget. Then:

"As I shriek curses at him, crash goes the window—and I see her husband spring into the room! The tender one had fallen, there at the foot of the joss, and Kwen Lung, his teeth gleaming—like a rat—like a devil—turns to meet him. So he is when her man strike him, once. Just once, here." She rested her hand upon her heart. "And he falls—and he coughs. He lie still. For him it is finished. That devil heart has ceased to beat. Ah!"

She threw up her hands, and:

"That is all. I tell you no more."

"One thing more," said Harley sternly; "the *name* of the man who killed Kwen Lung?"

At that Ma Lorenzo slowly raised her head and folded her arms across her bosom. There

was something one could never forget in the expression of her fat face.

"Not if you burn me alive!" she answered in a low voice. "No one ever knows that from *me.*"

She sank on to the divan and buried her face in her hands. Her fat shoulders shook grotesquely; and Harley stood perfectly still staring across at her for fully a minute. I could hear voices in the street outside and the hum of traffic in Limehouse Causeway.

Then my friend did a singular thing. Walking over to the gilded joss he reclosed the opening and not without a great effort pushed the great idol back against the wall.

"There are times, Knox," he said, staring at me oddly, "when I'm glad that I am not an official agent of the law."

While I watched him dumbfounded he walked across to the woman and touched her on the shoulder. She raised her tear-stained face.

"All right," she whispered. "I am ready."

"Get ready as soon as you like," said he tersely. "I'll have the man removed who is watching the house, and you can reckon on forty-eight hours to make yourself scarce."

With never another word he seized me by the arm and hurried me out of the place! Ten paces along the street a shabby-looking fellow was standing, leaning against a pillar. Harley stopped, and:

"Even the greatest men make mistakes sometimes, Hewitt," he remarked. "I'm throwing up the case; probably Inspector Wessex will do the same. Good morning."

On towards the Causeway he led me—for not a word was I capable of uttering; and just before we reached that artery of Chinatown, from down-river came the deep, sustained note of a steamer's siren, the warning of some big liner leaving dock.

"That will be the *Patna,*" said Harley. "She sails at twelve o'clock, I think you said?"

what's new in crime

by . . . Hans Stefan Santesson

Recent essays in the somewhat deadly arts — novels that you will wish to relax with, and others which reflect our times.

DORIS MILES DISNEY has always had a gift for turning a critical eye on the foibles—lethal or otherwise—of the men and the women we know so well live *just* around the corner. . . . A social portraitist of these times we live in, putting down on paper the things, amusing and grim, historic and trivial, that will be the delight of tomorrow's historians, she has, so many, many times, held up this mirror of history before us, with generally, if truth must be told, mixed response.

There is a certain homey tang to some novels, paler echoes though they be of touted best sellers, that seem to echo the whispers and the fears and the frustrations that are so much a part of most communities. These we don't mind. There is even a pleasant absence of those foreign influences which (with the exception of B.B. of course) we feel do not really belong in our more relaxed moments. . . .

But Doris Miles Disney has had the disturbing ability, in contrast to her gentler "cousins," to look just a little more critically, just a little more analytically,

Once more comments on current mystery and suspense novels—by both British and American writers—novels which, in their variety, illustrate this column's frequent (undoubtedly too *frequent . . .) preachment that there is no such thing as a simple definition of the mystery novel in these days.*

just a shade more blandly, on that complex fabric that is small-town American life, and she does so once more, in DID SHE FALL OR WAS SHE PUSHED (Doubleday, $2.95), which will remind many of you of her interesting earlier novels.

Jeff DiMarco, claim adjuster for the Commonwealth Assurance Company, is with us again; a little older in some ways, but still as able as always as he probes into the death of "the meanest little corpse" he'd ever seen.

Yes. Do read this!

Agatha Christie's superb recreation of life and death in the Egypt of 2,000 B.C., DEATH COMES AS THE END, has been reissued by Pocket Books in a Cardinal Edition, at 35 cents. If, somehow, you did not read this novel that was first published by Dodd Mead in 1944, read it—and remember that this is the story of people who were alive, who lived, who loved, and who were disconcertingly like us in their fears and in their hopes—and in their dreams.

August Derleth's THE RETURN OF SOLAR PONS *(Mycroft & Moran, $4.00) will be discussed next month. But don't wait until then to buy it!*

Fred Hoyle's OSSIAN'S RIDE (Harper, $3.00) is one of those disturbing novels that are beginning to appear these days that prove the correctness of Anthony Boucher's prediction some years back (to the horror, then, of many of our fellow members in the Mystery Writers of America), that a type of novel would develop which was neither pure suspense novel—nor pure science fiction. . . .

This is such a novel.

Shudder now, while you still may. . . .

I've never met Fred Hoyle, but I suspect it would be interesting to do so. Hoyle is that disturbing phenomenon in this field, a politically literate man who has been working in a totally different area—astronomy—and who has apparently decided, at this stage in his career, to turn to a kind of fiction that has been rather out of fashion in recent years. If you want a comparison, you can say that this is a sophisticated John Buchan, writing with one eye on Hollywood, and still managing to tell an extremely attractive adventure story—suspense story—call it what you will, as Thomas Sherwood, a young Cambridge scientist, sets out to discover—in 1970—the real reason for the rise to importance of Industrial Corporation Eire. Attempts to discover the origin and purpose of I.C.E. have been frustrated until British Intelligence sends young Sherwood into high adventure—adventure in the tradition, in the attractive tradition as I've said,

of John Buchan and those whom he influenced.

By all means read this.

Shane Martin's THE THIRD STATUE (Morrow, $3.50), has some attractive and memorable personalities, including Professor Ronald Challis who finds in the question of what has really happened to Edmund Grostellar a challenge—a challenge to the detective—a challenge to the searcher *and* dedicated detective which every archaeologist must really be. . . . As Challis searches for the lost cave of Phidias, on the isolated Greek island which he suspects had known Phidias in that great artist's final years, a number of ghosts and long-banished memories come to life. There are, I am afraid, some confusing moments in the novel itself, but the background is interesting.

Manning Lee Stokes' THE GRAVE'S IN THE MEADOW (Arcadia, $2.75) is a study of a thoroughly unpleasant and rather amoral man. You will quarrel with the finish, but the story itself has some good moments.

I admit that I am a little late in commenting on Eve Titus' delightful BASIL OF BAKER STREET (Whittlesey House — McGraw Hill, $2.75), but I am not at fault. I've only just read the book —and enjoyed Paul Galdone's illustrations—and hasten to recommend it to all you, whether you are eight years old or eighty. . . .

What happens when murder intrudes upon Parliament?

Stanley Hyland, author of the thoroughly delightful and extremely literate (that dreadful word again!) novel, WHO GOES HANG? (Dodd Mead, $2.95), answers the question with understandable authoritativeness, since he has been an Officer of the House of Commons. An Officer —not a Member, and thus the more uniquely qualified to write a novel like this. . . .

Don't miss WHO GOES HANG!

Dorothy Quick's novels of the South Shore of Long Island that she knows so well, always have a particularly warm and pleasant and relaxing flavor to them. This is true also of TOO STRANGE A HAND (Arcadia, $2.75), where death disturbs a Sag Harbor the summer people—and this I am certain of—do not know.

Agatha Christie's ORDEAL BY INNOCENCE (Dodd Mead, $2.95) is the rather deadly portrait of a family, united in their mixed memories of the past and united in their awareness of the reality that one of them in the Argyle household—is a murderer. It wasn't the guilty who mattered —it was the innocent—protested Hester Argyle, and there will be

moments when you will share Calgary's awareness that innocence, here, *was* truly an ordeal.

Elisha Macomber of Penberthy Island returns in Kathleen Moore Knight's latest novel, BEAUTY IS A BEAST (Doubleday, $2.95). Elisha is an older man now, after all, but the Chairman of the Board of Selectmen of Penberthy Township is still a man to reckon with as a beautiful woman faces cold, stark reality.

I don't know who E. H. Nisot is, but he tells a persuasive story —even when mildly improbable —in THE SLEEPLESS MEN (Doubleday, $2.95).

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agatha is her name

by . . . Maria von Krebs

What was this woman like who came close to immortality as Sherlock Holmes held her in his arms?

THIS may well be considered as heresy—an insidious attempt to destroy one of the foundations of the True Faith— that of the doctrine of The Woman.

It is my assertion that this exalted title does not, in true justice, belong to Irene Adler "of dubious memory," but to one much humbler in rank and station; one obscure and all but unnoticed—overshadowed in the Sacred Writings by the seemingly endless procession of beauty that graced the sitting room of 221B through the years.

Great is it, indeed, to be the only woman to have outwitted Sherlock Holmes; but how much greater yet is it to be the only woman courted and engaged to him! To only one woman can this greatest of all honors be accorded —Charles Augustus Milverton's housemaid, Agatha.

I am shocked that Agatha has been for so long overlooked and neglected by zealous Sherlockian scholars. Who is Regina Olson other than the woman whom Kirkegaard never married? Yet she is known by all who have ever read of the great philosopher.

Maria von Krebs (Barnard, '58) is the founder and President of The Briony Lodgers of Barnard, the only completely female scion society. The members are students or alumnae of Barnard College, in New York. Mrs. von Krebs is known in Sherlockian circles as "Irene Adler, the Woman."

Should not Agatha be accorded at least similar prestige?

Undoubtedly there will be violent objection on the ground that Holmes was merely acting in order to get access to Milverton's study. This I shall not dispute. But from the way the Master swaggered in and smugly announced the news of his "engagement" to the incredulous Watson, I think I am justified in saying that he thoroughly enjoyed that escapade. Futhermore, I believe I need only refer to the "Adventure of the Dying Detective" in order to fully support my conviction of the—let us say—heights of realism to which the Master invariably rose.

Consider the implications of this courtship. If nothing else, it at least disproves, finally and for all time, the fallacious theory that the Master was a misogynist. To prove this, I quote from the pen of Dr. Watson:

> "For some days Holmes came and went at all hours in this attire, but beyond a remark that his time was spent at Hampstead, and that it was not wasted, I knew nothing of what he was doing." [1]

"For some days . . ." —But how many is that? It would seem quite important to know the length of this courtship. Let us assemble our data, and pinpoint the exact number of days.

In relating the facts of the case to Dr. Watson, Holmes mentions that his client, Lady Eva Blackwell, is to be married in a fortnight to the Earl of Dovercourt.

Later in the evening, when asked by Holmes what the alternative to paying the blackmail would be, Milverton answers that if the money is not paid on the 14th, there will be no marriage on the 18th.

And finally, on the same evening that he reveals his amorous activities, the Master follows them up by proposing a plan to burglarize the safe with the incriminating letters in them, because the next day is the last day of grace.

Therefore the wedding is to be in two weeks, the 18th of the month. Since this places the evening of the meeting between Holmes and Milverton on the 4th, and the night of the successful burglary and murder of the 13th, there are left exactly 9 days. 9 days at most—a little over a week—in which to meet a woman, woo her, and in spite of the fierce competition of at least one other suitor, win her as his fiancee. No man could achieve so much in so short a time if this were his "maiden encounter" with the fair sex, especially if it was feigned. And by all means, we shall respect the veil of discretion with which the ever-chiv-

1. "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton."

alrous Dr. Watson, conscious of the delicate sensibilities of his readers, edited the Master's account of his courtship, although I cannot deny that I invariably react with utter disdain to the obviously censored passage:

> "It was a most necessary step. I am a plumber with a rising business, Escott by name. I have walked out with her each evening, and I have talked with her . . ." [2]

Does the good Doctor think us so naive as to believe that a man sweeps a girl off her feet in a little over a week by walking and talking with her—especially in the guise of a rakish young workman?

From the little information given to us in the story, I have often conjectured on what Agatha looked like, and what type of woman she must have been. Since we know from the Master himself that Agatha had at least one fervid suitor, we can safely surmise that she was undoubtedly young and pretty, though rather emptyheaded, but with a pleasant and amenable nature. A little bit of a flirt, I can picture her winking coquettishly as she told her tall, lean suitor all about how heavy a sleeper Mr. Milverton is, and how funny it is to have to work so hard to get him up; except, of course, when he's told that a woman is waiting to see him; he's out of bed then, and downstairs, in half a minute.

It is indeed unfortunate that Dr. Watson, usually so accommodating, did not choose to tell us any more about Agatha after she was ingloriously deserted by the rising plumber; there are certainly many questions that we would like to have answered.

How did the poor girl react to being run out on? Had she only been infatuated, or had she—tragedy of tragedies—truly given her heart, only to have it broken? It is my personal belief that Agatha, as Holmes so imperturbably assured Watson, did recover from being jilted and married the hated rival, settling down happily to placid wife-and-motherhood. But I think somehow that every now and then through the years, her mind would return to a certain evening—to a certain man looking down at her—a man tall and lean, with piercing, deep-set grey eyes.

Agatha, the housemaid of Charles Augustus Milverton, never knew how close she was to immortality when she was in the arms of Sherlock Holmes. Had she been imbued with but a spark of that from which the *Geist* of the Master was fashioned, hers might have been the supreme accolade: the woman who, in the heart of Sherlock Holmes, forever eclipsed and predominated the whole of her sex.

2. *Ibid.*

—Continued from Back Cover

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